

play®

Forgotten Realms Demon Stone

A comprehensive look behind the scenes of
the greatest D&D action game to date



Interview

Galleon

Toby Gard talks about
his long-awaited first
game post Lara



1st Hands-on

The Crusaders

Seeing is believing.
Strategy and real-time
action ignite on Xbox



Anime

Ghost in the Shell

Major Kusanagi and
Section 9 go back to
work in the virtual world

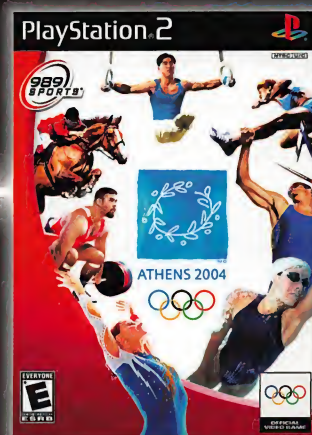




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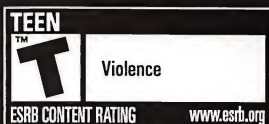
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While video game publishers continue to scratch their heads as more and more great games underperform at retail, a plague of their own design continues to hinder their cause, undermining sales and making it harder and

harder for you to get accurate, timely information. They're called embargoes, ladies and gentlemen, and they're the latest nail in the video game retail coffin, keeping us from doing our jobs unaffected by politics, keeping you from the flow of information you deserve, and, as a result, quelling sales.

When I got my start in publishing, like any other niche periodical, we created each month's issue by assembling the staff and coming up with the best magazine each month for our readers. If we wanted to cover Crash Bandicoot, we called and said, "We want to give Crash four pages," and they'd say, "Great! What do you need?" Whether or not other magazines wanted to cover Crash that month and how they went about it was completely up to them, thus each publication had its own feel specific to the editors driving the product. Cool concept, eh? We thought so. That same situation today would go something like this: "Hey, we'd like to give Crash four pages." To which they'd reply, "Sorry, no can do, we promised another magazine the exclusive first screens in exchange for a strapline on the cover." Or "If we only give it to you, the other magazines will be mad at us." Seriously, we hear that constantly: the magazines control the flow of information instead of the publishers. Cue the Twilight Zone theme. Such power we wield! So, unless you read whichever magazine they choose, for whatever reason, you're not allowed coverage on that game. Whether you like the way XBN reports or EGM or us or whoever, your favorite editors, and you, will just have to either wait, or you can try the old newsstand breeze-over and take your chances if the game hits before the rest of us get it. What I want to know is how this serves the publisher, the developer, or most of all, that all-important enthusiast standing in the magazine aisle. Imagine if you were Premiere or Movieline and Sony Pictures said, "Nah, no Spider-Man 2 for you this month; we promised it to just one magazine. Your readers

will have to wait." They'd laugh their asses off. Like Sony Pictures would limit their coverage for someone else's benefit after spending millions of dollars...right.

What steams us about this more than anything is that it's becoming harder and harder for us to inform you in the way you want and deserve. We just want a level play field. As embargoes become more rampant, it's like a game show putting each issue together, bartering for content. We appreciate and agree that if another publication is doing a cover story they should receive the lion's share of assets and behind-the-scenes for a given month, but to cut off coverage industry-wide seems a bit extreme...or worse yet is when a company grants one publication the exclusive review in such a way that it becomes the only review that hits before the game. That's just crazy. Once we've been denied coverage of a game in lieu of giving a single publication domain over its fate, our interest definitely wanes. I'm sure other publications (at least the confident ones) feel the same way. I just don't understand the motivation; if the only way we can get you to buy our magazine is by baiting you on the cover or being the only source for a given review, then we have failed miserably. You need to read as many magazine reviews as possible before purchasing a game, especially the ones by editors you share opinions with. What kind of an industry polices its press to such a degree that they alienate their consumers?

Freedom to cover the industry as we see fit in accordance with our readers' tastes is the very essence of magazine creation. The more it's stripped away and homogenized, the weaker we, the press, become—and as a result, the more confusing it gets for consumers peering into the abyss of today's disproportionate video game aisles. So the next time you wonder why your favorite magazine (and there are plenty of good ones out there) doesn't have a certain game you saw in or on the cover of another, well, now you know. It's out of our hands—the one place it needs to be.

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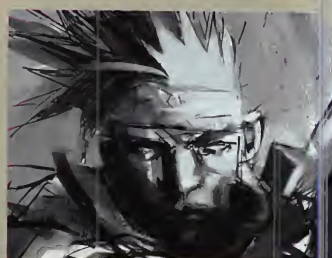
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"High adventure from the creator of Lara Croft™; Galleon is a triumph!"

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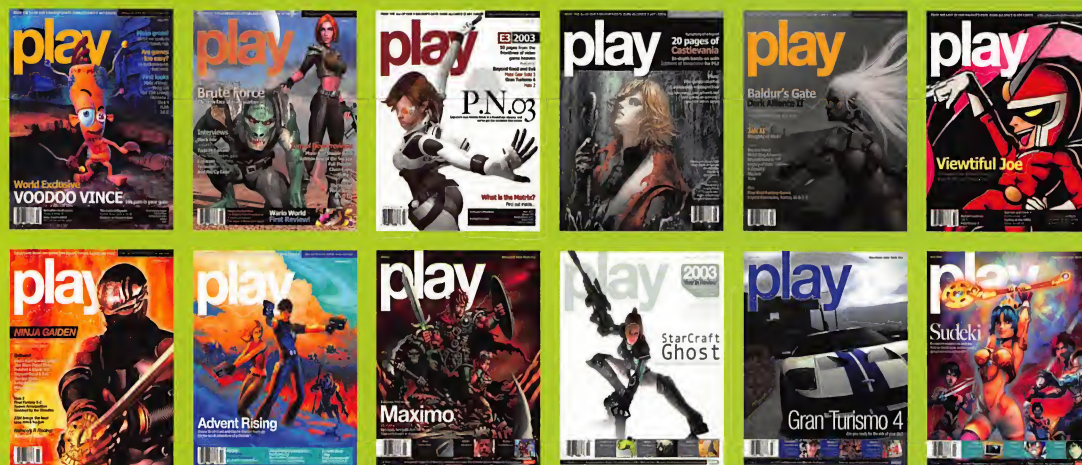
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Letter of the month

I'm writing in response to a letter that questioned the criticism of representations of female forms in video games as impossible temples of T&A, and that no one ever questions the representation of males. As a man, and an artist who has a healthy appreciation of the female form, I don't particularly agree with how men or women are represented in video games—either one.

All right, questioning the social merits of the impossible geometries of Lara Croft from Tomb Raider or Kasumi from DOA is nothing new, and there is a truckload of studies showing correlations between media body images and social dysfunctions (male and female).

However, this isn't my point. We've gone down this road. I've got two points to make in response. First, not all of us want to be Duke Nukem or Max Payne, and I'm bored with the Lara-esque love pontoons. Beyond the sociology of body images, I'm convinced that the game industry is so scared for its profit margins and stumped for new ideas that they don't have the will to try a wider variety of characters. Sure, you can make an argument for The Sims or our overly beefy Freeman from Half-Life, but by and large, the virtual world is swamped with bimbos and beefcake and boredom. At least for the "over 25," which is a major demographic of the gaming market, we're getting bored with the same ol', same ol'...

There are a number of books on how video games are becoming the greatest teacher in the First World. If so, I think about what we are teaching ourselves about ourselves in video games, and what this says about who we want to be. If artists are so creative, why do I keep seeing barrels of the same formulas with a new bell or whistle? Are game artists being taught to be creative and break formulas? In my opinion, most are being taught to be good little batteries in the Matrix, serving only to keep the franchises (and stereotypes) alive.

That's not going to work forever. There's going to be the pimply-faced, sweaty-palmed 15-year-old technophile in many of us who'll buy Doom III or DOA 4 to see what they've done with the physics engine (yes, and I'm even talking about the old mammary/gravity thing...). But as far as gameplay is concerned, some of us who are getting a little older and smarter (and there's a lot of us) are looking for something more.

We don't want to be Duke or Raptor or Lara or Kasumi. We want interesting characters, and not the cookie cutter B&B. We want thoughtful gameplay and content, not just thumb candy. We're out there; people like me, a lot of us. And I hope that sometime we'll make it clear with our pocketbooks that we want a change.

Patrick L

Too old-school?

Ah, how I remember the good ol' days, the days when you could be walking through a forest and four Bullet Bills would barrel towards you, an angry caterpillar would ask you to scam, and a guy with an endless supply of hammers would pummel you senseless. I miss the days when there was an actual sense of accomplishment after beating a level. A more simple time, but a time when a level

would actually ask something of you. If there was a level with a floating platform, you can rest assured the next level will kick it up with chainsaws cutting through that floating platform. What's this? Giant linebackers bum-rushing me? No worries...jump on those boxes...yeah, that's right, a dinosaur, now you can handle those hooligans. Fire power, cape power, raccoon power, hammer power, ride in a cloud, ride in a boot. Yeah. It was all there. The days of the power-up are long gone...I do not want a sword that levels up only to have a +1 next to it. I do not want to buy a weapon that completes the same task just faster. I do not want senseless beat downs. I do not want to play as a movie character. I do not want to use the same move to beat the entire level. I want to be challenged, tested and beaten! I want to fly with Yoshi above the clouds...I want to jump on a platform while spike balls are falling from the heavens and fish and bats flying in my face. I want a game that tests my skills in a new way every level. Look at DKC, that was a shining example of platforming perfection. Each level had you cussing just enough not to have you give up, each with a new theme of frustration! Games lose their enjoyment when there is no sense of accomplishment. Where is the satisfaction in playing a flute? Sailing a boat? Shooting water at stuff? These are all things I can do in real life, and find exceptionally boring. I guess what I really want is the old games...creativity in the gaming world has not

“...I'm bored with the Lara-esque love pontoons.”

evolved the least. When developers are more worried about release dates and getting the actor's face just right they lose any creative ingenuity. Plus they think it is acceptable to take an existing formula and call it another game. I have not played a Madden game since the Genesis '93, I think... it is relatively the same game now as it was then.... The same goes for every clone of any game. I played GTA III, got what the engine had to offer and that is the end of that. This has been done for a long time but not so blatantly until now. They give a game a couple new levels, a new box and expect me to buy it? Although the majority of gamers are either too young or too casual to figure these patterns out, an intelligent few can see developers are more concerned with their wallets than they are with us. They realize that if there is a title or concept with marketing value, then the bulk of the game can be a flaming load of excrement and they will still make great sales due to the mass hysteria inflicted by the easily persuaded media and gullible core audience of halfwits. Back in the golden years, developers put out some effort because they had to. Now things are just so cliché and recycled I have lost all hope. As for nostalgia, here are my favorites so you know where I'm coming from.... Ratchet and Clank is nothing new, it's just a 3D version of Bionic Commando only easier, and with no Nazis. No stories have or ever will come close to the work of art that was FFVI. Halo...3D version of Jackel, just without giant lasers, battle ships, submarine bombers and a tank the size of a mini-mall. Secret of Mana, the character development is yet to be surpassed; with eight levels of super moves and magic upgrades it was exceptionally satisfying. There are still some nice games out there...just

few and far between. Front Mission 4, probably the nicest looking. Well, looks like the sun is rising...time for bed. Keep up the good work gentlemen.

Stuart

We like the old stuff too...but honestly, wouldn't you rather play Ratchet & Clank over Bionic Commando on NES, Halo over Jackal? Modern updates of tried-and-true formulas are the stuff of great new experiences. Here's our prescription for what ails you. For a modern-day platforming romp with old-school gameplay: Voodoo Vince. Then for character/ move development, move directly to Demon Stone, and don't call us in the morning.

Help Wanted

Dear Play,
I'm a 25-year-old devout gamer and have recently come upon a quandary in my life. In search of some opinions, I've decided to go directly to the source to ask you a few occupational questions, but first let me quickly relate my position. A standard college tour of duty has yielded me a Bachelor of Molecular Science degree. Two years of work experience in this field has shown me what this discipline has to offer: headaches, repetitive experiments and mind-numbing frustration. It's time for me to research other types of work, starting with something that is slightly more creative.

However, I am just a stranger to you, who may or may not really exist outside the local reality of your email browser. As such, I suggest that if you can answer a few of my quick questions, perhaps I could help you derail some stress. If you're in a terribly dark mood, say, if you recently received an erroneous moving violation or your favorite anime toy collection has inexplicitly been nuked into a melting pile of swirling plastic colors, feel free to bomb my email with enough spam to bury a landfill of archaic Atari E.T. games. All right, I'll get on with my request then:

1) Generally, how do you feel about being an editor? Does each week present you with fresh material to work with? What do your responsibilities include? How are the hours? Could you tell me what is involved in your average workday? If given the chance, would you do it all over again?

2) How did you, personally, rise to your current status? College degree in English, journalism or communications? Lucky break? Before this job, what other types of writing work did you do?

Sincerely,
Tristan C

This here is the greatest "job" on the planet, short of being Jennifer Love Hewitt's private physician. Hours vary depending on many variables; we set our own. Creativity is constant. Work days include playing, writing, sometimes traveling and assorted ancillary duties.

The trick is finding people who consider gaming a lifestyle rather than a hobby. You have to, to do this...well, to do it right at least. That's how we all found each other and pretty much how we all broke into the business. Prior work we'd rather not discuss (porn).



A New Universe

Sega reveals more of the next Phantasy Star

What exactly is Phantasy Star Universe? Back at E3, Sega and Sonic Team were content to tease RPG lovers with a cryptic and gameplay-free trailer for the next installment in the beloved Phantasy Star series. As character and



landscape sketches quickly passed across the screen, mysterious phrases like "The rebirth of a legend," "A phantasy for the new millennium" and "Prepare for a revolution" tantalized show goers. Although the teaser also hinted that the game could possibly equate to Phantasy Star Online 2 or Phantasy Star V, murmurs within Sonic Team indicate the game is going in a completely different direction. Could it be an MMOARPG or even something that we have yet to think of? Whatever the case, Sonic Team has finally revealed these images of their top-secret project. Now we can just sit back and dream about what the rest of the game may be like...

Advance Guardian Heroes update

Treasure does it again



It's exciting enough that the rumors of a GBA Guardian Heroes sequel turned out to be true—and even better that we'll only have to wait until Sept. 22 for Sega to release the game in Japan. Although it's yet unclear how closely Advance Guardian Heroes ties in to the original (is that Zur in the middle screenshot?), the melee- and magic-based combat is still intact as either one or two players choose from three characters and combat the enemy forces. A battle mode for up to four players will also be included. No word yet on a U.S. release.



Tough times for VU Games

VU Games last month dropped the axe on 350 employees from their North American offices. "Restructuring the organization and reducing our cost base are necessary to improve our operating effectiveness and profitability," said the company's CEO, Bruce Hack. "This constitutes another important step in our turnaround plan aimed to better position the company for growth." At the time of the announcement, no major studios had been pinpointed to receive the brunt of the fallout, but VU Games did clearly point out that Blizzard Entertainment has not been affected.

Xbox successor specs leaked?

Microsoft is not happy. After convincing schematics with detailed information on the innards of the next Xbox, still being called Xenon, were leaked, the company released an emphatic statement debunking the authenticity of the report. If, however, the rumors are true, the new hardware will be powered by a "3.5+ GHz IBM PowerPC processor and a 500+ MHz ATI graphics processor," surrounded by 256MB of RAM. There's also speculation that the controller will see the deletion of the black and white buttons and the addition of extra shoulder buttons. One thing we can confirm with certainty: Xbox 2 will be extremely powerful.

Ninja Gaiden improves on perfection

You've been playing Ninja Gaiden, shaking your head in lament: "I wish these enemies were more difficult. I remember when games used to be *hard*." Get this: Tecmo's releasing free downloadable content to upgrade this already incredible game, with smarter enemies topping the list (you'll have to see for yourself if this means harder). Costumes, weapons, new bosses and even a user-controlled camera will also make the long list of new features available for download.

Goodbye Nihilistic

In no way related to the VU layoffs, Blizzard has taken development responsibilities for StarCraft: Ghost out of the hands of Nihilistic Software, and the company is likely to find other talent to finish the project. While we are told the news has nothing to do with the changing of the guard, StarCraft: Ghost has been delayed yet again to next year.

Sad reality for True Fantasy

There's little worse in our industry than having a game get canned after years of development, and unfortunately, Xbox fans are in for double disappointment. Particularly heartbreaking is Microsoft's cancellation of its amazing-looking Japanese-developed MMORPG True Fantasy Live Online. Additionally, Majesco has dropped the Xbox adventure game Black 9, leaving developer Taldren to close shop.

Criminals caught in Half-Life 2 theft

When news broke of the theft of Half-Life 2 source code, pessimists hinted that the news was more of an overheated exaggeration to deflect attention away from the persistent delays to retail. No way. This was a serious allegation that has since been under heavy investigation, recently uncovering a slew of perpetrators. With the aid of national authorities, several arrests have been made in various countries. There's no concrete details on just how deep the theft ran and how many arrests have been made, but Valve CEO Gabe Newell did praise the efforts of mostly gamers who provided thousands of tips. "Within a few days of the announcement of the break-in, the online gaming community had tracked down those involved," said Newell. "It was extraordinary to watch how quickly and how cleverly gamers were able to unravel what are traditionally unsolvable problems for law enforcement related to this kind of cyber-crime."



It's an Oddworld after all

EA to publish Oddworld Inhabitants' next bizarre adventure



Ever since Microsoft announced that they wouldn't be publishing the next installment of Oddworld Inhabitants' Oddworld quintology, fans of the series have wondered what would become of the renowned franchise. Well, wonder no more: Electronic Arts has struck a publishing deal with the folks at Oddworld, and they'll be bringing the next installment to PlayStation 2 and Xbox in 2005.

The new game—the third in the quintology (Abe's Exoddus is considered a side-story)—stars a new character appropriately named the Stranger. Looking much more rugged and combat-ready than previous heroes Abe and Munch, the Stranger, with his hat, boots and poncho, appears to be torn out of a twisted version of the Old West—a natural fit with his role of bounty hunter, chasing criminals in an untamed frontier land. According to EA's announcement, gameplay will consist of a combination of traditional genres, but given a unique Oddworld spin, while the "complex and inspiring story" will also receive prominent focus.

"Partnering with EA is a major win for us," proclaimed Oddworld Inhabitants president Lorne Lanning in a press statement. "Through EA's first-rate publishing and marketing expertise, the expanded universe of Oddworld can reach millions of game fans and extend the reach of this distinctive series."



Comics and games, united by fate

Game-related comics have been all the rage lately, and one of the companies leading the charge, Dreamwave, has revealed that they will publish a Killzone comic this November to coincide with the release of Sony's new first-person shooter. Meanwhile, UDON, makers of the Street Fighter comic, will be releasing series based on Darkstalkers and Rival Schools later this year. Dreamwave had previously held the rights to these Capcom titles, but recently dropped them from their line-up.

database

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	NCAA Football 2005 ea / ps2, xb, gc
02	Spider-Man 2 activision / ps2, xb, gc
03	Doom 3 activision / pc
04	Driv3r atari / ps2
05	Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow ubisoft / ps2, xb, gc
06	Catwoman ea / ps2, gc, xb
07	Sudeki microsoft / xb
08	Karaoke Revolution Vol. 2 konami / ps2
09	Legend of Zelda Classic NES nintendo / gba
10	Red Dead Revolver rockstar / ps2, xb



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten May Game Sales

01	Red Dead Revolver rockstar / ps2
02	NBA Ballers midway / ps2
03	Fight Night 2004 ea / ps2
04	MVP Baseball 2004 ea / ps2
05	Shrek 2 activision / ps2
06	Red Dead Revolver rockstar / xb
07	Transformers atari / ps2
08	Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain sony / ps2
09	Shrek 2 activision / gba
10	Onimusha 3: Demon Siege capcom / ps2



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02	Resident Evil 4 capcom / gc
03	Metroid Prime 2: Echoes nintendo / gc
04	Sudeki microsoft / xb
05	Fable microsoft / xb



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders mgs / xb
02	Kameo: Elements of Power microsoft / xb
03	Zelda: Four Swords Adventures nintendo / gc
04	Galleon atlas / xb
05	Spider-Man 2 activision / xb



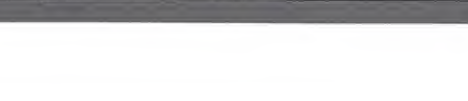
Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay vu games / xb
02	Demon Stone: Forgotten Realms atari / ps2
03	Kameo: Elements of Power microsoft / xb
04	Silent Hill 4 konami / ps2
05	Gradius V konami / ps2



Chris Hoffman some editor

01	Mega Man Anniversary Collection capcom / ps2
02	Astro Boy: Omega Factor sega / gba
03	Zelda: Four Swords Adventures nintendo / gc
04	Tales of Symphonia namco / gc
05	Guilty Gear X2 #Reload majesco / xb



Michael Hobbs art director

01	Zelda: Four Swords Adventures nintendo / gc
02	Mario Golf: Advance Tour nintendo / gba
03	Gradius V konami / ps2
04	Xevious nintendo / gba
05	Astro Boy: Omega Factor sega / gba



Nelson Lui associate art director

01	River City Ransom EX atlas / gba
02	Mario Golf: Advance Tour nintendo / gba
03	Onimusha 3: Demon Siege capcom / ps2
04	Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow ubisoft / xb
05	Samurai Warriors koei / ps2





play games



Forgotten Realms Demon Stone

D&D fan or not, this is your call to arms

“Three heroes meet by chance, or so it seems, at the entrance to an ancient mine in Damara. Not knowing one another, they were compelled by a mysterious force to this place. Now, they set forth on an adventure beyond anything they could have ever imagined. In their journey to the depths of the newly re-opened Gemspark Mine, they find a curious and irresistible entrance: a set of doors, each marked with a unique rune. When they break through the doors, a large gem separates from its fragile setting and falls to the floor. Two spirits are released: one of a Githyanki general and one of a Slaad lord. The freed spirits reconstitute and proceed to reengage the fight that was interrupted by their entrapment so long ago. The Githyanki general flourishes a silvery sword and rushes to the nearest planar portal to bring her army back to the battle. The other, more malevolent spirit summons more of its kind. The adventure is only beginning, though, for our heroes have unleashed a tide of chaos upon the Realms.”

Which means it's time to kick some giant, nasty, slithering, fire-breathing, ugly D&D ass. The heroes striking out to now clean up this apocalyptic mess in the land of Forgotten Realms are the consummate trio. There's Rannek, the powerful fighter who cuts through swaths of enemies with nothing more than the brute strength of his sword and a steady mastery of blocking. There's the staff-wielding, magic-loving sorcerer, Illius, who, with a growing efficiency, picks off creatures from a distance with a relentless array of projectile strikes. And then there's the sprightly, elusive rogue, Zhai, the choice hero for hiding in the mystical shadows for an unannounced dual-blade stab in the back—a personal choice for the most deviously satisfying death-blow in the game.

In *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone*, you'll find the varying traits of each hero distinct enough to quickly lead



to a dominant favorite, but the battles are set up in a way that you won't always find your personal hero the best for the job. Adding to the technique and immersion is the ability to instantly switch control to the next hero fighting by your side. Maybe you need more dominating strength to quickly open a path, or find that some trap needs to be set off or an invaluable power-up lingers in a spot that Zhai, the only character who can jump to higher ground, is capable of reaching. Maybe you've depleted Rannek's supply of throwing axes and need to call on Illius to drop a cascade of lightning on a group of Orcs positioned on a banister, capping you with arrows. Or maybe you just need to attend to a hero whose ailing health is a concern.

Working as a team is not just fun but imperative. Part of the strategy is building up a group super attack, switching from character to character in an effort to replenish their individual stores—which can be unleashed into a mass of attackers at any time if you're in a pinch. Building up a charged attack adds much to the tension and prompts you to avoid the enemies' blows, which diminish the buildup if you're not blocking and parrying.

A game like *Demon Stone* is often criticized for being “repetitive.” That lazy description means crap when unqualified. By its very nature as a traditional, relentless action experience, you hack and slash and kick and blast your way through massive armies of resistance that spill from all over the place—repeating the kill with durable combos until you've basically wiped out an entire species. It all takes place on a linear path—praise the gods—and you don't search for gameplay—praise the rest of the gods. (I hate the inane debate that games should be



As Illius grows in experience, his staff becomes an awesome tool for group attacks.

“...it's time to kick some giant, nasty, slithering, fire-breathing, ugly D&D ass.”

About the artist

Graduating from the Colorado Institute of Art in 1981, Todd Lockwood spent the next 15 years toiling in relative obscurity in the world of advertising, painting beer cans and satellite dishes and other mind-numbingly boring things. In 1990, when an agent in New York chewed him out for being hospitalized, he started to plot his escape... Eventually, a door was opened that would lead to a staff position at TSR, the makers of the popular role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Over the next seven years, he built an impressive body of fantasy images, and helped to redefine the look of the popular *Dungeons and Dragons* game for the Third Edition release. His work has been honored with multiple appearances in *Spectrum* and the *Communication Arts Illustration Annual*, eight Chesleys, two prestigious *World Fantasy Art Show* awards and numerous industry awards. His first art book, “*Transitions*,” from Chrysalis books (U.K.), was released in September of 2003. You can see more of his work at his website, <http://www.toddlockwood.com/>

free-roaming and open-ended.) Like a skilled band of musicians using their individual layers to make sweet song, Stormfront, the game's maker, embraces repetition as a foundation, calling on a masterful sense for the details that fill in around the base to create a frenetic, highly visceral, emotionally engaging game.

Part of the charge comes from a slick, simple combo system, which essentially sticks to the use of X and O for dominant chains of attacks, with projectile weapons and a constant attention to blocking completing the cycle. You can't pound buttons; an engaging rhythm of attack takes over once you get into the groove. It's all the scripted chaos around you, the keen placement of enemies, the impartment of brutality that accompanies each slash of the weapon, that also pulls you enthusiastically forward.

If all we were doing is running ahead and hacking away, that would indeed get pretty dull. There's a story here, written by renowned fantasy writer RA Salvatore, which threads throughout cutscenes and opens up through constant character chatter; the banter actually changes occasionally on consecutive plays. But just as important

is the character upgrade system, which in some form has become a necessary staple to the D&D action game. The system here is fairly basic yet just nuanced enough to perceptively alter the look and feel of your hero, granting you the option to buy items with collected gold and distribute experience points in a few main categories affecting such staples as health, strength, defense and magic across varying levels of skill. You'll also buy new combos and moves.

An enormous level of presentation runs throughout Demon Stone. It's at times a beautiful game, gorgeously shaded and textured, relying on its inspirations from the Forgotten Realms universe to create a wonderful variety of spirited settings: the War in Damara, the Jungles of Chult, the Gemspark Mine. When I commented that the game was painterly—to me, it's the perfect design choice here and showcases a wonderful display of color—I was told that exact description was what the art team was going for. Strike another plus in the success column.

The magnificent settings actually provide an inspired platform for entertaining, broader gameplay moments. In

the Wizard's Tower setting, the ancient weapons fly off the walls, prompting you to draw the enemy into their deadly path. Possessed statues drop their blades into enemies too abundant to take out without aid. Objects like bridges and ladders must be cut down to stop an enemy charge, catapults can be launched with fiery cargo. In one of the cooler scenes, Illius commands a shield guardian to stomp off on a pulverizing march of death. And how can you deny the devious fun of knocking the enemy into the grinding churn of a system of waterwheels, enjoying the clever animations as their slinky arms helplessly grasp the edge.

So that's most of what went through my head while playing *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone*. Read on for a look at what went through the minds of the creators who actually spent months making all this come alive.

Brady Flechter

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Stormfront Studios

Publisher: Atari

Available: September (PS2), November (Xbox)

Developer Diaries

Design



J. Epps Design Director

When Atari came to us with the D&D license, we knew we wanted to do something different. We wanted to make a game set in the *Forgotten Realms* feel like an action movie. After talking about it for a while, we realized that to create a game that really felt like an action movie, we would have to take some risks and try some innovative ideas.

From a gameplay standpoint, the core of D&D is about playing a party. We thought the idea of allowing the player to switch on the fly between three different characters with different abilities would capture that feeling, and would be a cool new addition to the action-adventure genre. After some thinking, we decided that a party made up of a fighter, rogue and sorcerer would offer us a great variety of gameplay. The fighter would be good at fighting groups of enemies. The rogue could sneak and jump and would be great at killing single

enemies using her sneak attack. The sorcerer would be a projectile thrower with both offensive and defensive spells.

When we first proposed the idea of switch-on-the-fly, we were all a little apprehensive, because none of us could point to a game that had done this in the action-adventure genre. AI, camera and the action of switching itself all seemed like severe hurdles to overcome. However, we felt like the idea was compelling enough to pursue, so we built a first level to try it out.

At first, we assumed that making each character only good at their particular skill would be best. The fighter had no projectile weapons, the rogue had no combos, and the sorcerer had no melee attacks, just projectile spells. However, when we first got switch-on-the-fly into the game using this framework, it wasn't as fun as we'd hoped. After a bunch of play testing, we found that people responded better to scenarios where they could always play the character they wanted, and weren't being "forced" to switch. From this we made a move to make the characters share a few more skills. Now players weren't forced to switch out of necessity but were encouraged to switch to make maximum effect of each of the characters' strengths.

In *Demon Stone*, we also wanted to interact with the environment more so that it felt like a living, breathing

place. We tested this out originally by creating a huge mill-like machine we called the "chibbleator." Anything that falls into this mill is ground up and turned into chibble—unrecognizable chunks of meat. We found it was very fun to use the knock-back combo to knock the enemies into this meat grinder. With this success, we kept going and made rope bridges that could be cut, magical walls of ice that could be destroyed, trebuchets to be fired at enemies, etc. All of these interactions helped to expand gameplay by offering more choices and tactics to solve each gameplay situation.

The vast plethora of magical items that exist in the *Forgotten Realms* held massive appeal for us. Let's face it—a huge part of an adventure game is upgrading your character with the sweet stuff. We knew from the beginning that we wanted all of the upgrades to appear on the character in the game. We then had a field day looking through the D&D books, picking out items and then designing what they would look like. A really important one for me was Zhai's Elven chain mail. I have always liked the idea of light but super-tough armor. Once the character designers showed me a rough sketch of what they were thinking, I was ecstatic. She looked great!

In the end, we feel strongly that all the elements in *Demon Stone* come together to create a game with an action movie feel.

"From a gameplay standpoint, the core of D&D is about playing a party."



Art & visual development

Devin St. Clair Principal Artist



There's a phrase from a Gregg Berryman book on design: "A valid visual style is the result of working toward the leading edge of visual communication. The development of a unique style comes from working in a series or sequence and pushing at visual limits." That, in a nutshell, sums up our mindset going into the visual development for *Demon Stone*.

We had just finished a game where we had faithfully recreated the environments, characters and scenes from a blockbuster motion picture. We had worked hard to capture the movie's cinematic feel and merge it with the gameplay. Now we wanted to evolve, expand and apply that style or approach of visual communication to this *Forgotten Realms* game.

Visually, our goal was to make the characters seem like real people who grow and respond to situations in the story, to depict classic *Forgotten Realms* monsters in a "realistic" way, and to make an epic world full of atmosphere that feels believable. We wanted to pull

scenes from the player's imagination and let them be able to play that "movie" through this game.

What makes for that cinematic feel? The camera is the player's eye. Games can learn a lot from movies on visual presentation for emotional impact but will never have the same luxury of being pre-rendered in 2D. Games are rendered in real time, 3D and interactive. As such, they present their own set of challenges in how to best "film" the shots.

Each chapter of the story Salvatore created became a game level. Beat boards were created so we would always be thinking about the game as a whole and we could physically see the connections between events and chapters, and the relationship of enemies to environments, and the relationships between the levels themselves.

One of the hurdles in making a cinematic-style game is the ability to combine dramatic filmic shots with camera work that supports the gameplay, moving to a more dynamic subjective or POV style to get the player immersed in the experience. That is definitely more gripping for storytelling and character development, but can be tough when responding to ranged attacks from off-screen, or having one of your party die because you lost sight of the fact they were being rat-packed by a horde of bugbears. To compound the situation, we also had switch-on-the-fly between three characters.

We all went in thinking we'd keep the camera in close

more often than on *Two Towers*, but we found that to fully utilize all three characters, we had to back it out a bit for the big battles where the screen is literally filled with dudes and you really need to be playing as the party as opposed to playing one character.

One of the trademarks of an epic fantasy adventure is the sense of an exotic and strange world, of traveling to far away places and seeing things that are different and fantastic, and the feeling there are other civilizations and cultures you are exploring. We were looking for environments that are visually rich, carefully lit and filled with atmosphere and a sense of place to establish the mood and give a sense of depth to the backdrop.

Starting with conceptual paintings to establish the look and feel, we designed our chapters based on how the characters would move through the "scenes" and how the camera would frame the sets. We went as far as storyboarding the player's progression through the chapter: what is the player going to be seeing, how will the camera move and be positioned, how will the cutscenes and storytelling be dovetailed into the gameplay, etc.

The environment is essentially another character in the cast. As such, it should have its own personality and behavior, and a part to play in the chapter. We build to the camera. In other words, our sets and scenes are all set up for a specific vantage point. Lots of detail where we are in close, less detail as things drop off in the distance, and to assure the sense of space, we set up specific shots that are set against long vista views with big matte paintings for backdrops.

"The development of a unique style comes from working in a series or sequence and pushing at visual limits." With our second "movie" game offering, I definitely think we have pushed on those limits. I think that *Demon Stone* will deliver an engrossing visual experience for gamers of all walks of life.

"The environment is essentially another character in the cast. As such, it should have its own personality and behavior."



Strong character designs are one thing; watching these nicely detailed creations impressively animate is another.



Audio



Andrew Boyd Audio Director & Robb Mills
Senior Sound Designer

One of the primary goals established in the initial plan for *Demon Stone*, and reiterated throughout the production, was to immerse the player in an epic, cinematic-style adventure. Here on the audio team we spent a lot of time working over exactly what that meant. We wanted the player to have an aural experience on par with the best blockbuster action/adventure movies they'd seen—a driving, epic score; snappy dialogue; exotic, horrifying monsters—yet at all times we insisted on maintaining a satisfying gameplay experience. It's no good to "sound like a movie" if the game doesn't first sound like a great game.

First, we tried to establish a real sense of place. Utilizing Dolby Pro Logic II extensively, we built high-resolution background ambient sounds that plunge the player into the world of the *Forgotten Realms*. Whether it's the mysterious and echoic size of the Gemspark Mine, the sweaty claustrophobia of the Jungles of Chult, or the chilling horror of the village of Cedarleaf being rent apart all around you, we used the ambiances to add life, depth, and believability to the beautiful environments the artists had created. These really help establish a context for the player's actions.

Then, interacting more closely with the player are the sounds of the various enemies, allies, weapons, objects and so forth. Here we pursued a level of detail and articulation pretty uncommon in console games. As with the ambiances, the goal was not so much to be "realistic" as to be impactful and dramatic, yet convincing, believable. What does a Githyanki Warrior "really" sound like? We didn't spend too much effort on a question like that. Are the Githyanki Warrior sounds so creepy and malevolent that fighting a big group of them makes your skin crawl? That's the kind of question we asked ourselves constantly during production. We developed a new, proprietary system for managing the audio system's resources to coax as much out of the console as possible.

Coming off *The Two Towers* we had gained a lot of experience using live orchestral music in a fully adaptive music system. This is a tricky balancing act—maintaining a sense of flow, continuity, and musicality, while still making sure the soundtrack always feels appropriate to the gameplay no matter what the player does. And add another wrinkle: done well, adaptive music doesn't just respond to the player, the music helps push the player along, sets up emotional states, even foreshadows game and story events. We decided that we'd compose the music completely in-house here. That way the music could be composed and arranged right along with the evolving gameplay and in very close parallel with all the new features we'd created to implement it in the game. We also decided early that to achieve the emotional impact we wanted we'd go with live orchestral music. We also brought in groups of vocalists for the choral elements,

and recorded a ton of live percussion. The music was composed to be accessible, but with a fresh approach to the adventure genre.

Finally, we've really tried to pay attention to the experience as a whole. Thematic elements weave in and out of the music along with the unfolding story. We make use of silence at a number of points throughout the game to provide contrast and to help refresh the listener's ears for the next dramatic onslaught. In the end, our goal is the same on every game we do: nothing short of making the best sounding game you've ever heard.



"...done well, adaptive music doesn't just respond to the player, the music helps push the player along..."

The story behind the story of *Demon Stone*



Dan Daglow President & CEO, Stormfront Studios

Just a few years ago, we valued stories in video games for how well they framed the action without getting in the way. Aliens stole the princess so I need to go blow up some aliens. Traitors murdered my family so I have to take revenge. Terrorists will kidnap the princess and murder my family if I don't get there first. Skip the details. Please don't roll five minutes of text across the screen or recite a long speech, because I already know who I'm supposed to kill and why.

When PS2, Xbox and GCN came along, we were able to aim for higher goals. The quality of our music and sound effects could match that of a theatrical movie if you have a home theatre system. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Stormfront was able to seamlessly mask the transition from movie footage to interactive game—players were surprised when an Uruk-Hai hit them and the controller vibrated in their hand while they still thought they were watching a movie.

Unfortunately, the methods that were used to create

games often did not change with the technology. Many game stories were still written by the programmers and designers who created the gameplay. Talented gamers, but not writers. More aliens, princesses, terrorists and heroes out for revenge... The intro movies grew even longer, and they looked and sounded great.

On *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone*, we were anxious to break new ground after having a huge hit on *The Two Towers*. Working with the characters and worlds of JRR Tolkien and Peter Jackson had been tremendously fulfilling, and even we were surprised by the depth of emotion the game's characters and music could arouse in players. We wanted to achieve the same kind of emotional involvement in *Demon Stone*. We had the animators, artists, audio engineers, designers, musicians and programmers who could create an immersive, cinematic game...but we had no film masterwork to start with.

Atari introduced us to RA Salvatore, the New York Times best-selling novelist who has sold millions of books set in the *Forgotten Realms*. Many people know the *Realms* solely through his work, and working with Salvatore meant we had gone directly to the source in creating the characters, story and settings for this fantasy world.

As it turns out, Salvatore is also a gamer and a tremendously easy person to work with. He didn't just dictate a story for the game design team to follow.

Instead, he asked the leads of the creative crafts what their goals were for the game, how they wanted to build on our work on *Lord of the Rings*, how they wanted to add unique elements to *Demon Stone*. Out of those discussions, he selected some existing characters from his books, as well as developing new ones. In a series of meetings and phone calls, he traded ideas, brainstormed and kept tuning.

At the end of the process we had an original RA Salvatore story that fit our game, and we had a game that truly was based on a unique story. This gave us the foundation for a cinematic title complete with complex characters, plot twists...and an abundant supply of enemies you need to defeat to right a great wrong.

The final step was writing the dialogue, making each character sound unique and right while keeping the cinematic scenes short. We always want you to spend most of your time playing the game, not watching a movie, and we've learned how to tell stories well without long cutscenes that send you to the kitchen for a sandwich.

We asked Robert Goodman, the Emmy award-winning television writer (*Batman Beyond*, *The Zeta Project*) to join the team to create the screenplay for the game. Like Salvatore, Goodman merged seamlessly into the game design team, leveraging his experience as part of writing teams at Warner Bros. Television. He provided the discipline and intensity to bring our complex characters and epic story to life without ever pushing the controller out of the player's hand.

As you can hear, working with the writers on *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone* has been both exciting and fulfilling for the Stormfront team. We hope that players will find the experience equally worthwhile!

"Please don't roll five minutes of text across the screen or recite a long speech...I already know who I'm supposed to kill and why."

Technology

Kenneth Chao Technical Director



From the beginning, one of the primary goals of the Stormfront Studios Engine has been to allow the artists, audio engineers, designers and musicians to be as creative as possible without feeling limited by the technology of a particular game platform. Here are some of the components of the system:

- A game design tool that allows the game designers to visually lay out the logic and gameplay setups of entire levels. They can see directly on screen what the level will look like, and can very quickly mock up and test gameplay setups. Not long ago, experimenting and making a change in a game level might take you an hour, since you had to wait for the computer to re-compile all the code and assets. In our tools, the same change can take less than a minute.
- Our new PAGFAST system (Proprietary Ambient Glow and Focus Adjustment Shader Technology), that allows our artists to adjust the mood of each scene by subtly manipulating light and focus. This mimics the processes that cinematographers and lighting directors use in movies to put the audience in the right mood for the scene even before the action begins to unfold.
- A particle effects tool that allows the artists to create environmental effects (waterfalls, fire, rain), effects that play on characters (magical spells, flames), effects that are on weapons (glowing or pulsating colors, licks of flame) and effects that are triggered based on gameplay events (explosions, lightning).

- A cinematic editor that allows the cinematic artists to create the in-game cutscenes, as well as scripted events—animations that run on screen and look like they're part of the game action. This year we added the ability to incorporate high-resolution head models with facial muscle animations and lip syncing, which make animated characters look good in close-ups when they're talking.

- A streaming system that allows the environment artists to create large, expansive worlds without any load points that would interrupt gameplay.

- An audio engine that is adaptive to the gameplay. This allows the musicians and audio engineers to create music and sound effects that change based on the gameplay situation.

- A content management system that organizes and processes the tens of thousands of elements that make up the game: art, animation, sound files, AI code and a wide variety of other assets. This allows every member of the team to easily share the work they have created. In addition, every team member can easily view changes from the other disciplines without interrupting them.

We have now spent almost six years continually optimizing the engine to make it as fast or faster than any competing product. This gives the content creators the ability to create environments that shine despite being populated with a large number of highly detailed characters.

We have an extremely talented and experienced engineering staff here at Stormfront Studios. We all share the same vision for the engine. This allows us to do what we need to do in an environment where egos are left aside, while continuing to incorporate new technologies to bring the engine to the next level. We often are asked how we manage to pack so much action and so many characters into Demon Stone, and this commitment of the team is the answer.

"We often are asked how we manage to pack so much action and so many characters into Demon Stone, and this commitment of the team is the answer."



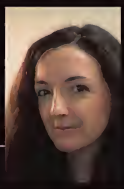
Take control of the mighty shield guardian and feel the meaning of true power.





Voice recording

Sarah W. Stocker Senior Producer



In casting and recording the voice actors for *Demon Stone*, it was important to us that the quality of the voices and performance hit the same high bar we held up for every other part of the game. Towards that end, we brought in top talent, including actors you'd recognize like Patrick Stewart and Michael Clark Duncan, and actors you may not know: the wonderful BJ Ward, Dan Riordan, Vanessa Marshall, Chris Nissley and Robin Atkin Downes. Seasoned voice directors Kris Zimmerman and Hanna-Barbera veteran Gordon Hunt helped the actors hit the best takes.

Patrick Stewart, who plays Khelben, was a dream to work with. His reads were always right on, but he was wonderful taking direction if the director wanted a different approach. He's a consummate professional both in and out of the booth, determined to get the best take possible. What was great for us was that he was also warm and friendly, taking time to touch base with each of us after the day's work was done. We're hoping his son, Daniel, who's a gamer, will enjoy playing the game as much as we enjoyed working with his dad!

When Michael Clark Duncan walks into a room, he instantly has everyone's attention. Not just because of his intimidating physical size—the guy is huge!—but [because of] his sheer personal presence. And that voice! When he speaks, you can almost feel your bones vibrate. He's a very gentle and warm person, so it was remarkable to see him transform himself into the evil Ygorl.

We chose highly experienced but "not yet famous" actors to play the heroes themselves, since we wanted the player to feel especially connected to the character they were developing as they played. This is in contrast to star actors, where the audience has pre-set expectations about what the characters will be like.

Each of those lesser-known actors brought something special to the role. For example, BJ Ward, our Cireka, used her background in opera and her experience in performing in Klingon for *Star Trek* products to perform her lines in the Githyanki language. BJ's delivery was so convincing that we actually began to understand what she was saying!

When Dan Riordan, who plays Rannek, walked into the room, we were floored—this guy is Rannek! Usually voice actors have a very different look than you'd expect—a frail-looking, nerdy guy with a big, powerful voice, a woman who looks like a librarian but who sounds like a ravishing sex symbol. But Dan was Rannek all over—ruggedly handsome, huge and muscular. He was built for the part of the sword-wielding warrior!



Ilius is at his best unleashing magic, but when things get tight, his staff will do just fine.



Dan's a passionate actor and he gives everything in his performance. As Rannek, he had some very intense scenes, especially when facing off against the Troll King that destroyed his village. Working with the grief and rage he brought to that performance had him nearly bouncing off the walls. When the scene finished, he exploded out of the booth, and needed a few minutes walking around the quiet Santa Monica block to bring Rannek back to a "quiet place." The intensity and energy of that work is palpable in the game.

In contrast to Dan, Chris Nissley brought a quiet calm to Illius, our thoughtful sorcerer—right up until he performed the combat yells and grunts that nearly blew out the mike!

Vanessa Marshall, our Zhai, was a total spitfire. She had us all cracking up between takes, and quickly got hold of Zhai's attitude by preceding each take with a sarcastic "ha!" We trimmed off the "ha," of course, but that little trick got her to the perfect "tude

For each recording session, we had the director, the

studio sound engineer, myself, one of our audio team and our scriptwriter, Bob Goodman, on hand in the recording studio. Having the writer in the studio was immensely helpful. When we'd run into trouble with a line, Bob was there to rescue us with a quick re-write. He also helped by filling in the director on the back-story and emotional content of the scenes as we went. This was especially helpful with the on-the-fly gameplay lines, which required a little extra context.

The actor works from a tiny soundproofed room with layers of glass between us and them. The director communicates with the actor via a mike hooked up to their headphones. We also videotaped the actor performing, so that our animators, who animate to the voice files (just like in feature animation films), had reference from which to work.

All of the actors, and the directors, brought an energy and excitement to the game that does exactly what we'd hoped for—pull the player into and through the story with engaging characters that feel present and three-dimensional. **play**



"When Dan Riordan, who plays Rannek, walked into the room, we were floored—this guy is Rannek!"



Kingdom Under Fire The Crusaders

Hail to the new king of real-time combat

I grew up reading Heavy Metal magazine and worshipping bands like Black Sabbath, Judas Priest and Led Zeppelin, so Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders is my holy grail—like War Pigs incarnate (there's one to Google!). Once in a very long while, a game will come along to redefine a genre, and that's exactly what's happening here; only to one I'd forgotten even existed since Dragon Force graced my Sega Saturn. Leading a legion of dark elves into battle against marauding humans (or apes as they like to refer to them), controlling a slender blue-skinned warrior goddess is right up there at the top of my to-do list. From the outset of KUF, you can select a human or dark legion, taking up the cause in a holy war of epic proportions. The humans seek to reclaim the territory of Eastern Bersia for the glory of God, while the dark legions endeavor to spread their reign further by way of the Ancient Heart. You can get lost in the lore; that's the gist.

What sets KUF apart begins with presentation. Beyond the brilliant real-time cinematography that frames the story, every facet of the action is a work of art. Battles so dense with impeccably clad cavalry horses, combat-dressed orcs, gleaming armored knights and hordes of ground troops that you can barely see the terrain look strikingly good, with each class looking and acting exactly as they should. The most rewarding visual, however, is that big, bright, shining death-dealer in the middle of it all: you. Whomever you choose to lead, once you've deployed your divisions, you control in real-time, hacking into each battle with such perfectly tuned malice that you feel the conflict around you. If you welled up watching *Braveheart* or *Gladiator*, have Tito bring you a tissue; this is a level of medieval euphoria like you've never experienced in a game. Between battles, amidst the entirely polygonal world map that you can pan around at will, you'll find the character management is honed similarly well. Visiting the barracks to manage the skills, equipment and special abilities of your officers, assign new job classes to your divisions or bolster your troops is an easily assimilated process, yet as deep as you can imagine, especially as the war evolves. Deployment is handled with similar ease, via a



Marvel at 1,000 units on the battlefield at any one time, each beautifully rendered with 3,000 to 4,000 polygons.



seamless on-the-fly control scheme that never cuts away from the battlefield. As such, discord, kinships and even dissension among the ranks plays out front and center. Assembling your divisions in the woods, for instance: playing as Lucretia, leader of the dark elves (they utilize the cover of the forest to heal), she and her assigned damphire overseer Morene (whom she likes to refer to as either "bitch" or "blood-sucking leech") are at each others' throats, speaking dialogue that's as sharp as their blades. Everything happens on the battlefield in seamless cinematic fashion, from the banter within each division to the battle scenario itself. When your scout says archers are approaching, you will see them approaching from afar. Tighten your ranks and send the cavalry. And then there's the music. Say what you will about Korean developers (they're coming to save us, by the way), but when it comes to soundtracks, no one does it better; "empowering" is the only way to describe it.

While certain American publishers continue to slumber, placing their hopes on cash cow milking machines and those ever-scary focus groups, Phantagram has been busy making a great game. Bet they've never seen a focus group or TRSTS report in their lives. Think the buyer at Best Buy or Wal-Mart will give a crap? Me neither; but don't you miss it. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Phantagram
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: August

"Beyond the brilliant real-time cinematography that frames the story, every facet of the action is a work of art."



Grand Theft Auto San Andreas

Take back your street cred,
one death at a time



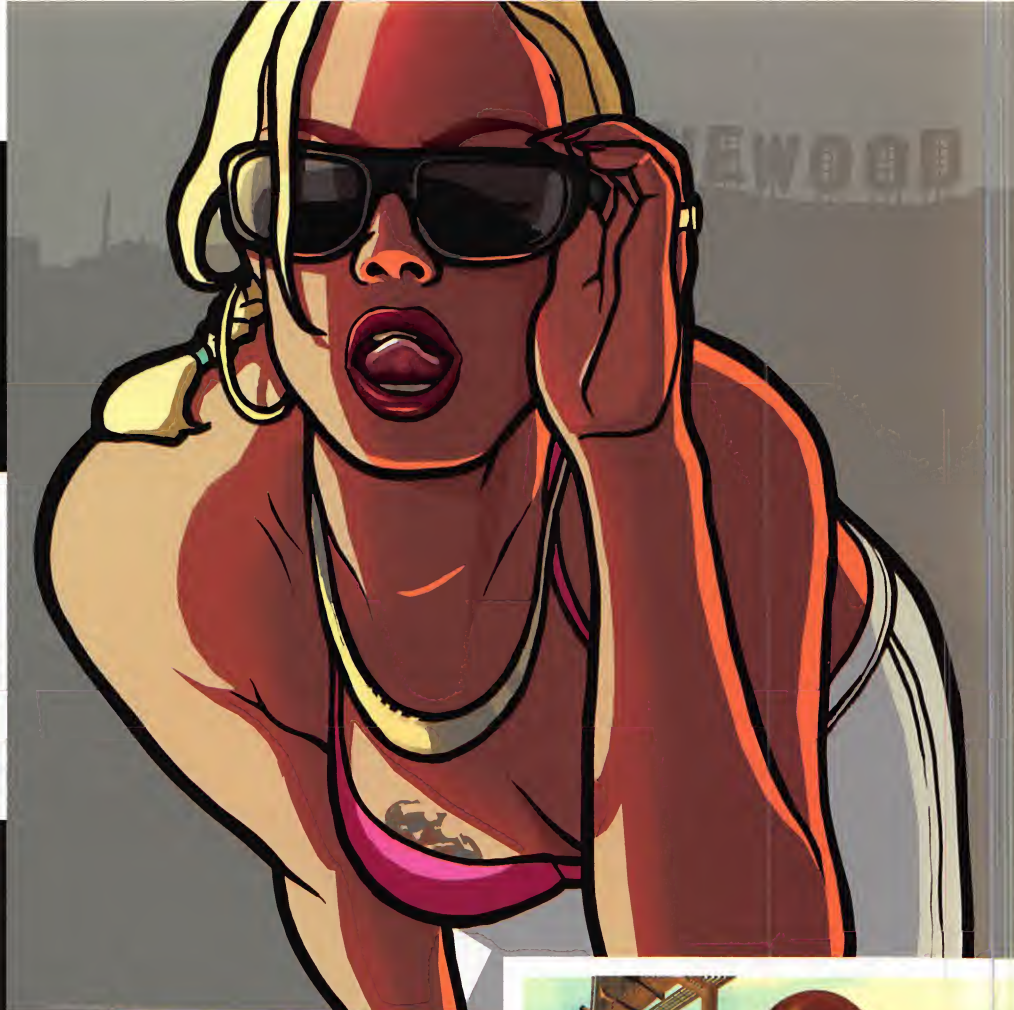
Tired of a cushy life devoid of inner city fear? Does the absence of gunshots outside your window get you down? Need a little violence in your diet? It's OK, admit it: you've always wanted to be in a gang and go on a murderous rampage. And now you can, in the new-and-improved Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.

If you've already come to join the millions of other GTA faithful in gleefully patrolling the grimy virtual city streets with gun and club in hand, just wait till you step into the new shoes of local gangbanger CJ. The boy's got skills, like the newly found abilities to deliver head shots, strafe and efficiently lock down his weapon with the reworked targeting system. He's also an unusually freed character for a video game, open to runs of leisure that actually affect his disposition and relations: get a haircut to change your look, eat too much and get fat, make a bonehead move on a casual quest and piss off the homies.

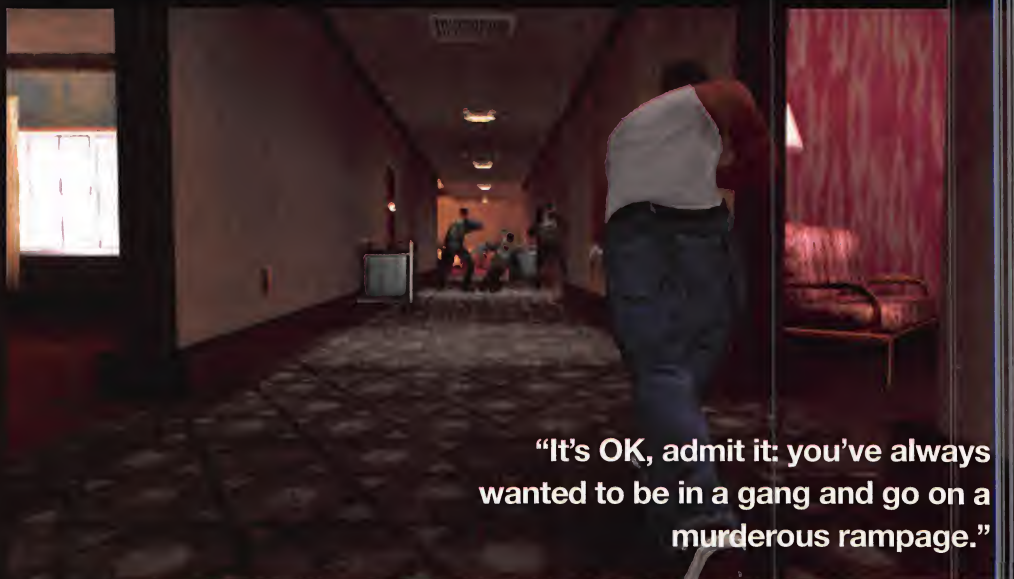
There's a lot of ground to cover in your quest to regain your old Orange Grove gang's brutal reputation and bring the families back together. A triad of cities are open to explore—San Fierro represents San Francisco and Las Venturas represents Vegas; Los Santos alone, fictionalizing Los Angeles, is as big as the entire region of GTA: Vice City. The time is the early 1990s, where the music and styles reflect the era with that signature Rockstar flair you're going to devour more than ever. Technical improvements to the engine are immediately noticeable: draw distances have been doubled indoors and quadrupled outdoors—you'll also be venturing outside the city—and poly counts have been bumped up. Other touches abound, like the three independent animations added to a drive-by, providing a new level of conviction to the frantic slaughters. Rockstar's even built the largest motion-capture studio on the east coast to ramp up the production.

CJ's got a lot of familiar GTA freedom, but there exists a very distinct resolution to the story. Rockstar's building in a lot more stretches of key plot points and moments of scripted, frenetic events. Look forward to twisted moments such as an on-rails shootout and wild chase with the cops that ends with an officer hanging onto your hood as your ride, showing cumulative damage, careens off a bridge before meeting with the blades of a pursuing helicopter. I wonder if a human body would disintegrate as bloodily as that poor cop in real life? **Brady Flechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Rockstar North
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: October



Eat too many of those yummy doughnuts and your character will actually show the results.

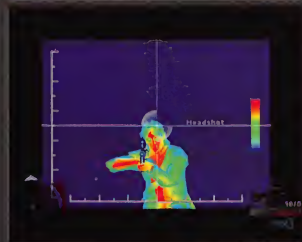


"It's OK, admit it: you've always wanted to be in a gang and go on a murderous rampage."

Syphon Filter
THE OMEGA STRAIN



▲ PLACE HAND HERE ▲



YOU HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS THE AGENT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

REPORT TO: GABE LOGAN, I.P.C.A. COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF.

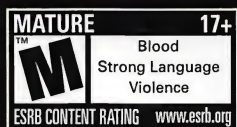
OBJECTIVE: STOP OMEGA STRAIN VIRUS AND THE TERRORISTS WHO CONTROL IT.

ARSENAL: 100+ HIGHLY LETHAL WEAPONS INCLUDING: SILENCED SUBMACHINE GUN, DSC-1 THERMAL SNIPER RIFLE, CH-9 MACHINE PISTOL, BLASTER GRENADE.

MISSION DIRECTIVES: ELIMINATE ALL ENEMY AGENTS AND PREVENT OUTBREAK OF DEADLY MUTATING VIRUS. ANY INFORMATION RECEIVED WILL BE HIGHLY CLASSIFIED AS YOU WILL BE ENGAGING LETHAL INTERNATIONAL ASSASSINS. SUCCESS OF THIS GLOBAL COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE OPERATION IS CRUCIAL.

PRIORITY: URGENT.

THE BEST WEAPON WE HAVE IS YOU.



PlayStation.2



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PLAY IN OURS.

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Gradius V

Leave it to Treasure

The level at which Treasure develops shooters never ceases to amaze me. While it's true that their PS2 Silpheed was not the measure of Radiant Silvergun or Bangaio, they have certainly come on strong since with Ikaruga and, now, Gradius V.

This is still the Gradius that we know and love, but Treasure has managed to subtly transform it into something rather more special than it used to be. Apart from the general standard of excellence that we have come to expect from them in terms of enemy and boss patterns, level design and collision detection, they have also given the game a state-of-the-art sheen with absolutely gorgeous 3D backdrops. But these aren't even the best bits. The genius of how Treasure has transformed the game lies in their modification of the Options, the classic Gradius power-ups that follow your ship around and increase your firepower. What they've done is given you control over them. Using a new multi-function button (R1), you can, depending upon the Option configuration you choose, lock your Options into any position. One configuration lets you manually control their direction of fire, allowing you to aim in any direction. Of course, this has the side effect of distracting your mind from the bullet and obstacle dodging, and instantly the game is deeper and more engaging than it ever was. In another configuration, you can flow the Options around your ship as you move, meaning that you can lock them in a wide spread or pull them in tight for firing at boss cores. And in a completely appropriate nod to the times, you have the delectable ability to re-collect your Options when you die. In addition, you now continue right where you were killed.

The demo we were given was painfully short, showing us only two levels, but I've seen enough to say with confidence that Gradius V will be a shooter to remember. **Michael Hobbs**

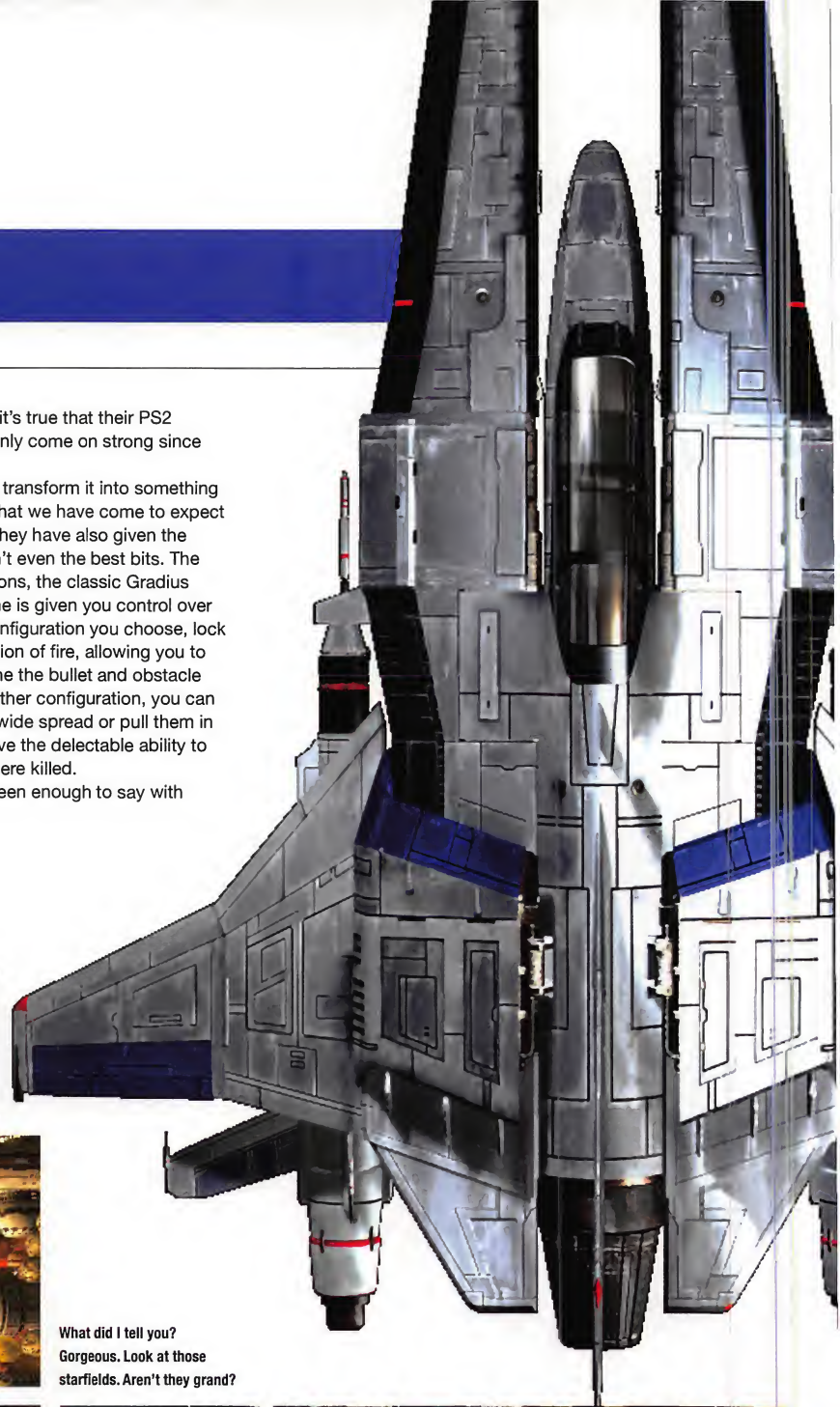
System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Treasure/KCE Tokyo

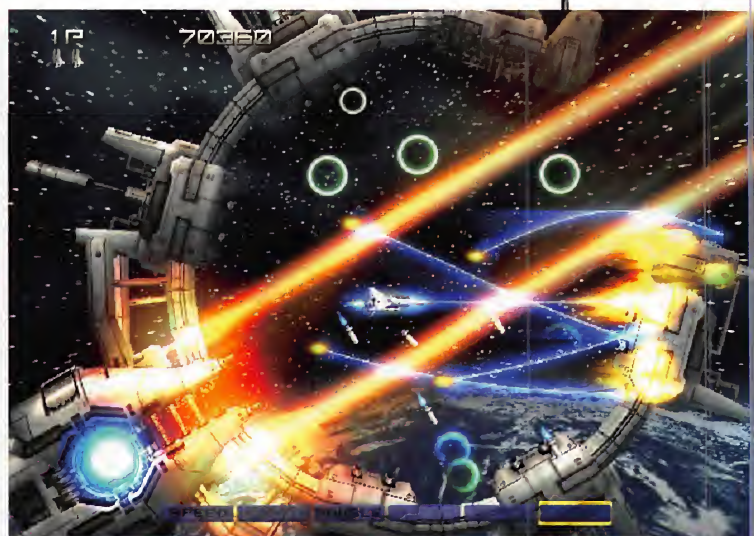
Publisher: Konami

Available: September

"This is still the Gradius that we know and love, but Treasure has managed to subtly transform it into something rather more special than it used to be."

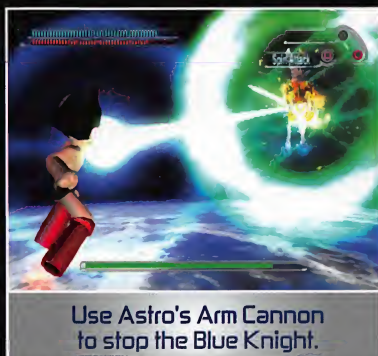


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PlayStation 2

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Gungrave

Overdose

Drug-free OD

If ever a game that should have hit big went by with a whimper, it was Gungrave. In a full-on heavy-metal assault on the senses, Red Company threw down some of the most wickedly beautiful and nastiest, lumbering arcade-style gameplay ever, to the world's collective yawn. A few million more PS2 owners later, and riding on the coattails of an exceptional new Geneon anime series, will the story be any different? Let's hope so. In the wake of its lackluster performance, one might expect Red would tweak the true-to-life (well, Beyond the Grave's life, at least) formula, but like any self-respecting force to be reckoned with, they've stuck to their guns, opting instead to add extra spice to their death jambalaya. Once again, the emphasis is not on mere mass killing (the game's stock-in-trade), but how good you look doing it with the action nuanced in such a way that justice can be served like a sloppy mess or with great precision, amidst the same gorgeous cel-shaded visuals—courtesy of Yasuhiro Nightow (*Trigun*) and Kosuke Fujishima (*Sakura Wars*)—that made the first so visually arresting. Lumbering through the larger—though still completely destructible—environments, the goal remains the same: picking off Mafiosos like human origami. Beyond the Grave picks up the fight right where he left off, hell-bent on sending every last member of the Corsione to an early grave to prevent the proliferation of Seed (long story there; do yourself a favor and refer to the anime). Replayability was another key factor in the original, so Red plays that card again too; *Overdose* is not only longer, but there are now two new unlockable characters: Juji Kabane, a blind, bitter, tough-as-nails swordsman, and Rocketbilly Red Cadillac, a rocker who really knows how to handle an axe. Don't make the same mistake twice; in fact, double your pleasure by tracking down both of these inspired anime-based headbangers. They don't come any more stylized than this. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Red Company
Publisher: Mastiff
Available: Early fall



"Once again, the emphasis is not on mere mass killing (the game's stock-in-trade), but how good you look doing it..."

Beyond the Grave kills to the beat of a different drummer.



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Spy Fiction

One part action, one part sneaking, one part gadgets

As a successful inaugural effort by newly formed Access Games—a spattering of ex-Konami and Extermination designers comprise most the team—Spy Fiction already released to a positive response in Japan, yet good wasn't good enough in the preparation for the American packaging. Sammy has decided to basically elevate the game to a new level, adding an invaluable dose of new lighting, refined animations and gameplay enhancements, even extra details to reworked levels. The results build more than enough muscle to stand up to the obvious inspirations in the genre.

The developers have placed the emphasis on action, with the stealth aspects often coming down to the degree of caution the player chooses to explore. Go full-on quiet and you can finish your mission without a kill. From my approach to the game, the real fun comes in the use of force, either by hand-to-hand smackdowns or a wide arrange of cool spy devices. The weapons and gadgets available aren't bound by realism: playing cards become razor-sharp instruments of death, cig torches are always handy in lighting the way, bandage bombs demolish the unsuspecting.

Access Games loves spy movies, tucking in little references all over the place as a spirited homage. In one level, you'll be dropping through a lattice of laser beams. In another, the top of a speeding train becomes your battleground as you fight off terrorists while avoiding oncoming beams. An enormous casino also makes an appearance.

Missions differ depending on the character you use, and you'll often have two paths to consider taking; rewards and obstacles may differ dramatically. If you prefer the more aggressive abilities of Billy Bishop, you'll have to contend with the inability to take the disguise of women, while the choice of Sheila Crawford—the second partner belonging to a powerful strike force known as the Special Execution Agency—affords the larger range of identity theft. Stealing the look of an enemy is the thrust of the gameplay—snap a photo of your victim and you're set for the makeover, carried out in the closest barrel or hidden room. When you assume the look of someone else, certain devices must be kept hidden, otherwise your cover's blown. Any time you raise an alarm, you have to find a safe spot to wait out the storm and allow the danger level to fall to "caution."

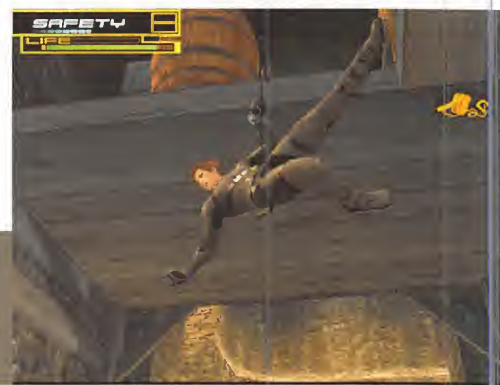
One of the coolest ways to go unnoticed is through the use of a cloaking device, which can be employed only

in a static pose. Crawling along girders and overhangs, attaching yourself to the ceiling is also a handy technique for evasion.

The verdict's still out on exactly how deep the personalized gameplay paths will extend, but it's the hope of the designers to allow your deductive reasoning to come into play more than forcing you to abide by their rigid setup. For example, you may come across falling platforms and find that it might be easier to use your spider grips, attach to the wall to find an easier way to safety. The game rewards exploration, building in multiple endings and varying consequences to certain actions you take. Spy Fiction will inevitably draw comparisons to familiar competition, but the good news is that most of those comparisons fall short. **Brady Flechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Access Games
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Available: August

"...more than enough muscle to stand up to the obvious inspirations in the genre."



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PlayStation 2



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Viewtiful Joe

Worlds collide in viewtiful style

As if Viewtiful Joe didn't secrete enough coolness already, leave it to Capcom to juice the PS2 port to such a degree that 'Cube owners will be jumping on the bandwagon all over again—by throwing Dante into the mix along with his very own storyline and damsel in distress, the lovely Trish. As long as you can deal with him waddling around with a big head in a Speedo when he's not powered up (it's difficult, I know, but try), the Devil May Cry hook is a devilishly cool addition to the game.

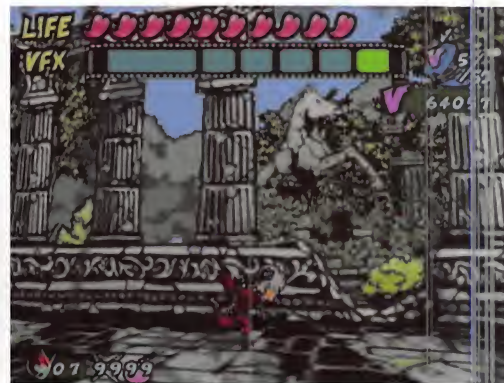
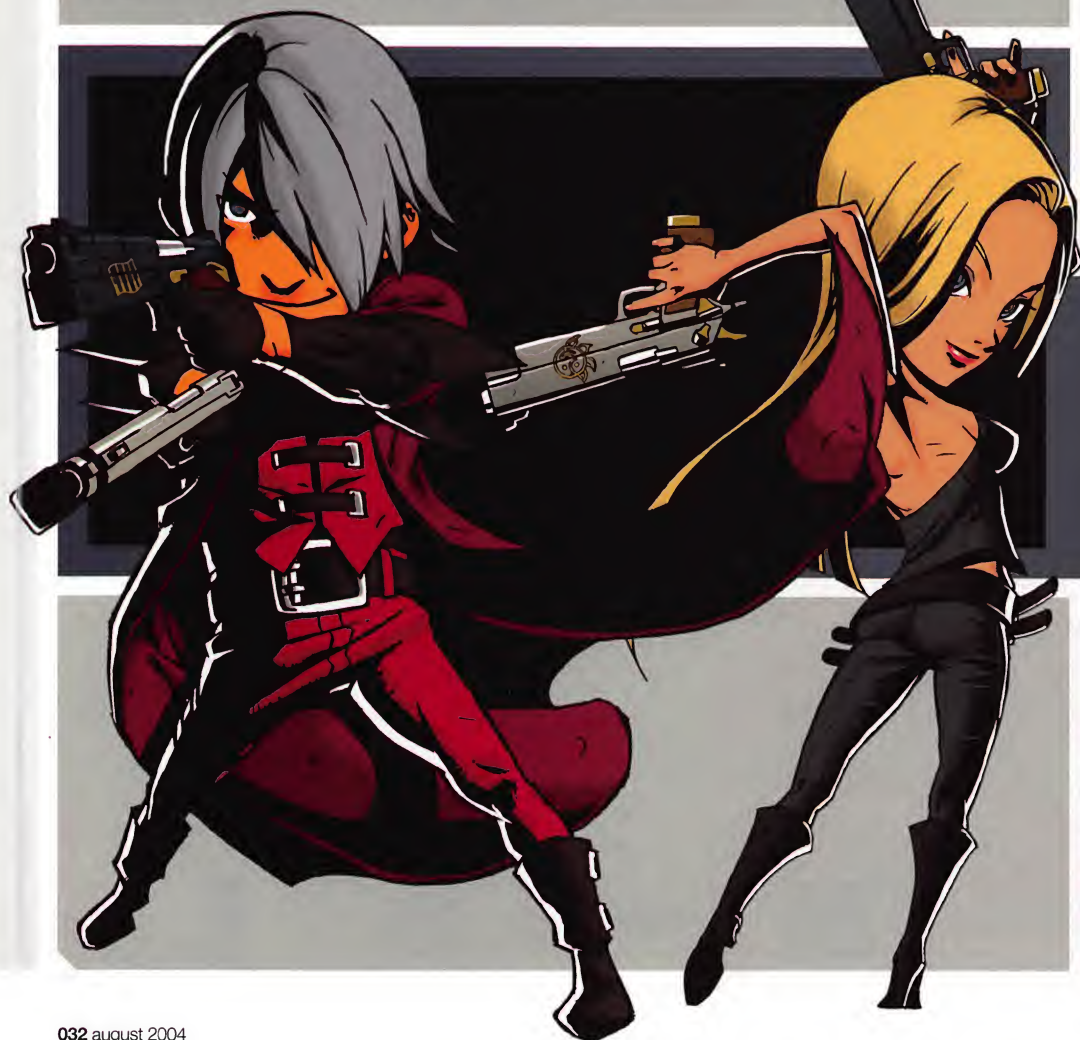
For the uninitiated, Viewtiful Joe is a unique fusion of modern gameplay and classic design that marries the look of 3D (through stunning diorama backgrounds that shift and turn in real time) with the pinpoint playability and graphic superiority of 2D, while boasting the coolest hook since the double-jump with Joe's VFX powers. The game epitomizes everything that's essential for an action brand to hit the big time, with a look, sound, hook and universe all its own. Transformed into a celluloid hero, Joe can speed up and slow down time, rendering even the fastest enemies vulnerable to his varied attacks and defensive

moves, as well as manipulate objects in the physical realm. Anything affected by movement is Joe's to control and his benefactors take it to the extreme and beyond.

Having hit big on the GameCube, Joe's PS2 prospects (given the numbers, having Dante on board, and a multi-format sequel in the works that promises double the fun) are way past good: the game is every bit as good on PS2 as it was on GameCube (if not better in light of the new mods) and even a tad easier to tame via the Dual Shock 2's more intuitive shoulder buttons.

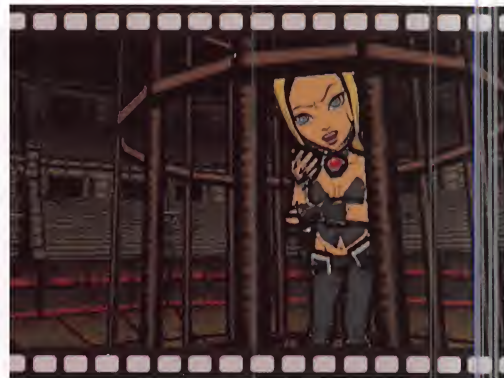
Becoming a bona fide franchise is one thing; becoming a Capcom franchise is quite another, and it couldn't happen to a more deserving game. Toy lines, TV, film—there's no limit to how far Joe can go, and we intend to be there every frame of the way. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Clover Studio
Publisher: Capcom
Available: October



Dante cutting in on Joe's action... The devil made him do it.

"...leave it to Capcom to juice the PS2 port to such a degree that 'Cube owners will be jumping on the bandwagon all over again..."





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Blinx 2

Masters of Time & Space

Time for change?

Sitting down to speak with Sonic the Hedgehog co-creator Naoto Ohshima about his second bid for Xbox critter supremacy, he's like a kid in a candy store, answering questions through his translator while completely absorbed in his game. The only time he puts down the controller is when he crashes it after five straight minutes of kitty creation, to which he fidgets nervously until the game is back on. He appreciates that we loved the first Blinx, but Ohshima is in America to address the media one-on-one to preempt any confusion over his latest creation.

...Ah, the conundrum that is Blinx, the game that yanked the soapbox out from under me. I was so sure that an Ohshima platformer infused with the best graphics of the day and truly innovative gameplay would sell like mad that we put him on the cover...but it was not to be. Cue life two of nine.

As a result of the flogging Blinx received for being too hard (which it wasn't) and overly complex (okay, so maybe "they" had a point there, but only because of the time limits), Ohshima, perhaps more than any other renowned designer ever would, or should, took the criticism to heart and completely re-worked the formula. I've always maintained that people who didn't like Blinx probably don't like platformers in the first place, because if they did, they'd have loved it (I mean how can you not?), so I'm not on board with this line of thinking. But the mainstream rules, and so with Blinx 2 there are no time limits, no crystal combinations to contend with and two ways to complete each level—one of which should deliver the player to the level's end on a silver platter. If Ohshima could come to your house and play for you, I'm sure he would: he loves this franchise, as do I. You can't get confused, you have unlimited time, and you probably won't need nine lives. Behold modern game design.

Be all of that as it may, Blinx 2 is still a big, bright, shining star in the platforming universe, and, admittedly, better honed for mainstream acceptance. The maps are bigger (much bigger) and fraught with more simplistic fun such as environmental puzzles, lock-on battles and user-friendly time controls; there are two modes of two-player (co-op and vs.), and the game is now split between Blinx and the stealthier pig goons that caused the glitch in time in the first place—big hook there. Ohshima has pretty much transformed the game into a more standard action-platform package, only with all of the hooks that made the original so appealing, and for the first time ever in a platformer: character creation. I wouldn't want to plump up Sonic or make Mario lean and mean, but it works especially well with the Blinx troops. From fur type to the boots on their paws

to their shadows (!), we're talking ultra-comprehensive.

There's no denying the magic of Artoon combined with the wonderful tunesmith from games like Sonic CD and NIGHTS, but I'm still not 100 percent sure whether Blinx 2 is the byproduct of an industry that's lost sight of itself, trying to repair the effects of a divided press corps by conforming to criticism that's unfounded in the first place, or the game Ohshima intended in the first place. It'd take some hands-on for that, but he wouldn't give up the damn controller. I just hope Ohshima gets what he wants and deserves this time around: a fair shake based on the type of games he builds. People who see bopping around as a fat cat in a space suit with a vacuum need not apply...or judge. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox

Developer: Artoon

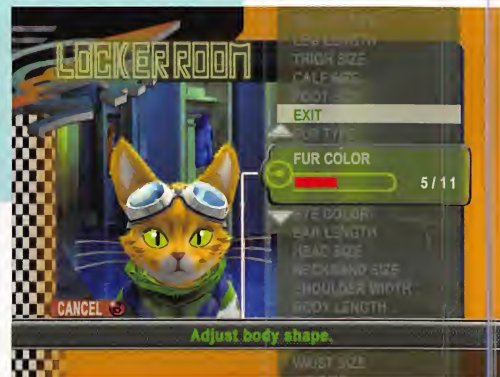
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

Available: October



► La mystere du cat

When asked "why cats?" compared to Shigeru Miyamoto's garden crawlers and Yuji Naka's chickens, Ohshima explained, "Microsoft employees are like house cats. They're the little guys in the background—cogs in the massive corporate gear works. Blinx is for all those people who work really hard to make a difference but get no recognition." Hmmm, just like game developers. Still doesn't answer the cat question though.



"...a big, bright, shining star in the platforming universe, and, admittedly, better honed for mainstream acceptance."

Play as the pigs! Like it or not, half of the game is now the other white meat.

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Kameo

Elements of Power

There's magic in the air

I've been a disciple of the church of Rare since they flew the Tradewest flag back when the parallax scrolling they exhibited in *Battletoads* on the NES was considered a modern miracle. Their history spans years deeper, but that's when I caught the fever. Games that followed like *Battletoads* in *Battlemaniacs*, *Killer Instinct*, *Donkey Kong Country*, *Goldeneye*, *Perfect Dark*, *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Jet Force Gemini*, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* and *Star Fox Adventures* have had a profound effect on my love for video games, so when they jumped from Nintendo to Microsoft (I hear there was a little money involved), I didn't know whether to pop the cork or climb out onto the ledge.

It's been a rocky couple of years. Grabbed by the *Ghoulies* was the first Rare game I didn't score an A (gave it a B+), but *Kameo* especially had me worried. Early looks at the game lead me to believe that I'd be spending too much time locked into alternate characters I didn't want to be, negating the splendor of their first female lead since *Jet Force Gemini*'s Vela broke new ground as the first 3D female with exposed undies and animated bosoms on the N64. I could certainly see the brilliance of the play mechanics, but scooting around as a plant or pile of rocks just didn't seem all that compelling. It took all of three minutes of hands-on gameplay recently to not only lay my concerns to rest, but reawaken that sleeping Rare gene inside. These guys are still the best at what they do, because they wouldn't have it any other way.

Amidst its dark fairy tale story (basic relinquishing of evil with a Cinderella-like twist), the allies that accompany Kameo on her quest are accessible seamlessly as the player deems their abilities necessary, divided between situations

where it is obvious you need to transform and conditions embedded deeper into the fabric of each level where a keen awareness of your surroundings becomes key in combat. As you become one with the game's "Quick Switch" control scheme, you'll find yourself using Kameo's sidekicks like a combo army, seamlessly slipping between personas to exploit the enemy. Kameo has her own Trinity-like attacks, but they're best utilized in conjunction with her teammates, creating a rhythm that truly sets the game's combat apart... yet Kameo is never more than a button press away.

Elsewhere, you'll find everything you'd expect from a Rare-scale action epic on Xbox: visual euphoria, a truly magical soundtrack and an evolving array of action puzzles and level-specific gameplay that wraps itself around you like a warm blanket. If you're a Rare fan, *Kameo* is like coming home. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: Q1 2005



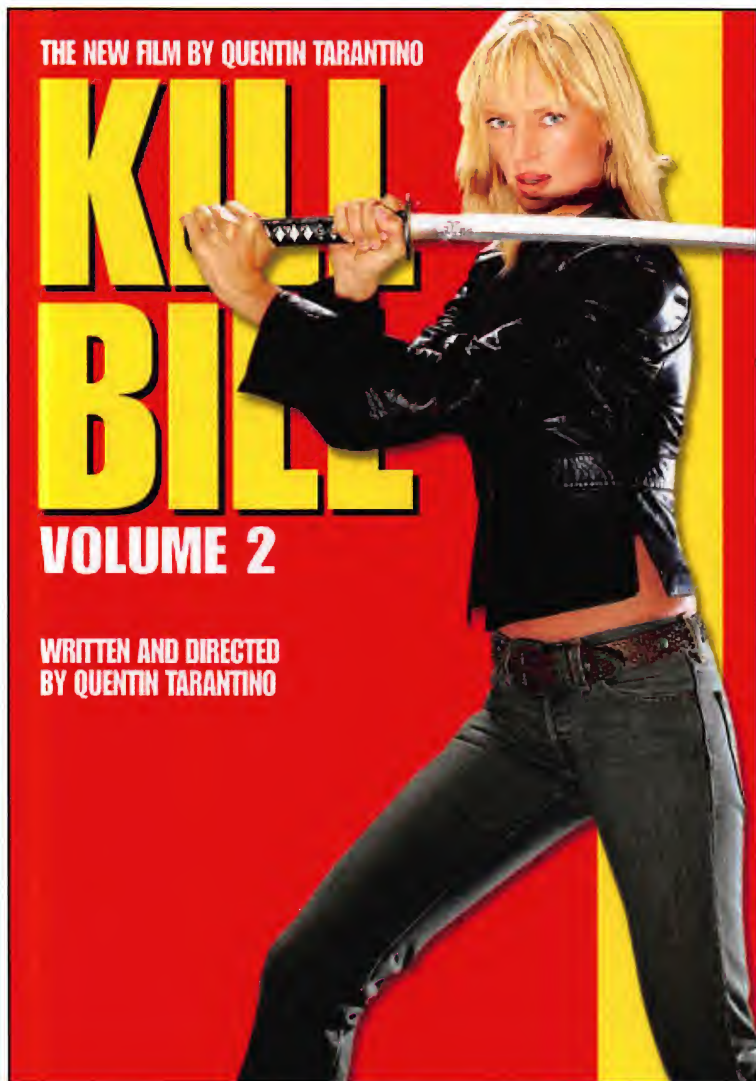
"These guys are still the best at what they do, because they wouldn't have it any other way."



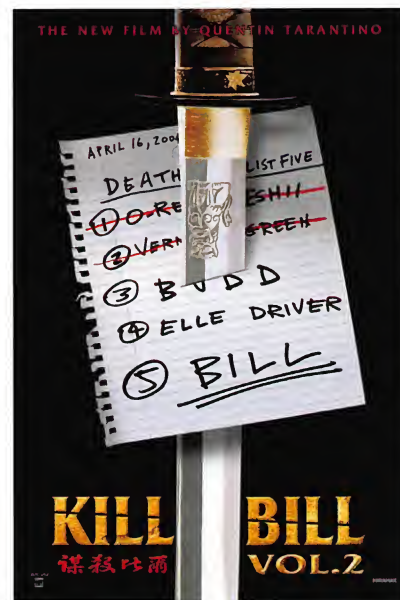
A dark contrast to the scene opposite; Kameo isn't your usual bright, sunny romp.



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Robotech: Invasion

Protoculture addicts



If pecking away at alien invaders and popping off body parts until they either explode or come to a grinding halt while blasting drop ships out of the sky sounds like a fun way to spend an afternoon, then keep reading...and should you happen to regale in all that is Robotech, well then, no need; your latest fix is assured. This is as close to active duty as a member of an elite Robotech assault unit—scooting around massive environments in a transforming metal shell, laying waste to scores of Invid invaders—as you're likely to get on the current generation of consoles. VC's follow-up to the impressive cel-shaded Robotech: Battlecry, *Invasion* is as far from "more of the same" as sequels get.

Streamlining things into a more tactical action package, we join the war in progress, diving mech-first into a ground campaign forged on a story spun from the new DC mini-series, *New Generation*. Mowing through the enemy to the beats of Jesper Kyd, transforming between cycle and assault suit to cover the vast terrain, each massive quadrant is loaded with strafing and shooting (in either a first- or third-person viewpoint) with an emphasis on tactics and





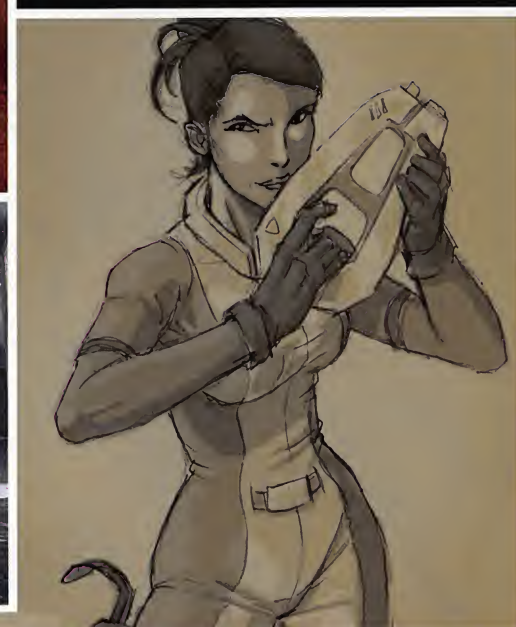
When the dust settles, play on: Invasion boasts two-player split-screen and eight-player online play (via Live or PS2 Online Pack).

"If you frequent first-person shooters, you'll feel right at home with Invasion's easily assimilated control scheme..."



reflexes. Choosing the right weapon for the varied invaders is key, but so is exploiting their weak points, picking off arms or legs (or going for that one beady little glowing eye) until each area is secured. Robotechies will also revel in the integrity of the models, the AI, the animation and the mission ops under each distinctively comic book sky. Touches like real-time cinemas, a branching storyline that changes based on which gender character you choose and a varied array of ops keep things fresh, compounded by the intuitive connection between man and machine when you take the controls. If you frequent first-person shooters, you'll feel right at home with Invasion's easily assimilated control scheme and, thanks (again) to Havok, physics that assure you feel the weight of the situation while taking in all of the lore and heavy metal thunder of one of the world's most beloved sci-fi series. VC has done a superb job recreating the Invid in 3D. Coupled with seamless level progression and a wonderfully orchestrated soundtrack, Invasion, like Battlecry, looks poised to live up to the namesake once again. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Vicious Cycle
Publisher: Gathering
Available: September





Galleon

Over land and sea, Confounding Factor's first epic is just that

We've been waiting patiently for Galleon since the early days of Dreamcast (its originally intended destination), and now Toby Gard's studio, Confounding Factor, has finally churned out its first game. Best known for creating Lara Croft and then bolting before she became the poster child for video game girl power, it's never been clear how instrumental Gard was in the actual Croft equation—a control mechanism that began as a celebration, before a lack of innovation within the sequels degraded it to that of a nimble female that steered more like a truck—and so his solo project has been shrouded in mystery. Was it Gard or Core that made us nudge up to all those switches, line up every jump and endure the turning radius of a semi? Is he visionary or was he merely in the right place at the right time? Galleon holds all of the answers. Whether it represents his original vision for Lara or an improvement on the theme, having watched it grow from afar, it's a brilliant adventure either way. If you like your games epic—steeped in massive action puzzles, titanic mechanisms that span far and wide, and swan dives plummeting hundreds of feet into glimmering pools of underwater gameplay—inquire within...and then begin the vigil for the sequel. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Confounding Factor
Publisher: Atlus
Available: August

Interview

Beyond the Tomb

An interview with Toby Gard

play: We've been following Galleon since its inception and it was certainly worth the wait. Were there bumps on the road to completion or did the game simply take this long due to its size, complexity and scope?

Toby Gard: Thanks for your kind words. I'm glad you enjoy the game. I think that there were three or four big bumps that we felt during our own adventure in finishing Galleon. Right from the start, I entered into a development contract with the original publisher that was a bit too ambitious from my side.

The project required more development staff than I had initially projected. The lack of staff meant we all had to get our hands dirty with a range of activities and work extremely hard. An upside from this is that we all learned a lot that would no way have been learnt had I stayed at Core.

We also encountered a few technical problems that I'll discuss a bit later if that's OK. On a final note, I can't say too much about this for legal reasons, but we went through a few long periods of time where funding has been really tight for us. This is also something that has definitely slowed down our progress with finalizing the game.

During the dev cycle, technology has taken a sizeable leap that you have obviously taken advantage of with your effects, massive environments that never load, etc. How has the game evolved beyond its original form? Did you scrap at some point and rebuild?

The vision for the game stayed pretty much the same throughout the project, I'm happy to say, although we did have to reduce a few things here and there. We always used PCs throughout the development of the game, so the reasons to create Galleon for Xbox and the benefits of its hard drive, etc., were obvious.

We did have to rebuild our levels and characters at one point in order to keep the look of the game up to date, and as a knock-on effect we did indeed have to scrap and rebuild our graphics engine in order to handle the new art at an acceptable framerate.

Rhama, Faith, Mihoko and pretty much all of your leading cast have very distinctive silhouettes. They're simplistic model-wise yet come across as expressive, totally unique and engaging. How did this very un-Croft like design style come about? It was important for me to have characters that were quite different from Lara Croft in terms of the ways they looked and behaved, for obvious creative reasons! In a way of thinking that was like that for the design for Lara, I wanted characters in Galleon that were quite iconic and distinctive. If the characters (or indeed any aspect of any product) can't really stand out and be different, how can they have any character and therefore appeal? This thinking is also shown in some of the character designs for comic books and movies – some of the more exaggerated, different and iconic characters are often the most popular and I have followed similar methods.

During the development of Tomb Raider, I would have loved for Lara to have more speech, facial expressions and for her to interact with other characters further. Sadly, the technology available at the time, project deadlines and other constraints prevented this from happening. Introducing more human elements with the characters in Galleon has been something of a natural, evolutionary step for us.

Love a game with Faith as the lead next by the way...

Aha! Clearly a lover of the headstrong and redheaded yet vulnerable type!

It's common knowledge that you created Lara Croft, but not how instrumental you were in the initial game design and concept. With Galleon you've seemingly perfected the Tomb Raider formula: highlighting key areas of interaction, the in-game journal, epic boss encounters, lock-on targeting for pick-ups, etc.—all things the Tomb Raider series would have benefited from greatly. Had you stayed with Core, might these have been staples in Tomb Raider, or is this you taking the Croft formula to the next level? Some of the elements in Galleon really have been a natural progression for us. We have found that when you envelop yourself in a project (in my case this project was Tomb Raider), it can be a lot easier to notice the problems apparent—as long as you can sense them in the first place!

It would have been interesting to apply some of the solutions we created in Galleon to Tomb Raider—but that is kind of by the by now. It has been really interesting to start again from scratch. Finding some of the problems with my previous work has allowed us to create new game design parameters in Galleon (like Rhama's extreme abilities in the scope of game world, etc.) that would have been a little too far-fetched if applied to Tomb Raider.

Rhama has a very distinct set of parameters all his own that are beyond, yet vaguely

“As Galleon really has been our baby, we’ve stuck with and nurtured it like any good parents of a newborn.” —Toby Gard creator



Defining Faith has played a major role in the game's development.



similar to, Lara's, only with added freedom and control. You've actually managed to make the character a play mechanic without the cumbersome feel that always plagued Lara. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, was this your vision for Lara from the get-go, or are you improving on the theme? Some of our solutions in Galleon have really been answers to our development problems back in the day. The technical constraints of then-technology really restricted us to confined indoor environments with a control mechanism that was geared toward the player having to be constantly aware of the hazards in the game world—rather than the game character, supported by technology and the player. I am still very satisfied that we pushed boundaries as far as we could have with that generation of console hardware though; thankfully, the sales would agree with me.

That sense of adventure, where every room and chamber is a new mystery, you've taken to new heights. It's hard to imagine what a design doc or blueprint for such an epic might look like. How do you approach a game of this magnitude with so many sub-levels, branching layers and choices? It must be a massive undertaking.

I think there are two main reasons why the level design has worked so well for the game. One is that we did a lot of pre-production. We made sure that a lot of the game/level design was done and finalized on paper before we started spending more money and time on things like



modeling and programming. This has reduced some of the risk in the project.

I think the second big reason is down to our in-house level editor, which I am really thankful to our team for. Well, I call it a level editor, but it kind of goes a bit beyond that. Our in-house tool allows designers to have far greater and more instant control over the layout of the levels and many other design aspects to the point that they could create a game quite different from Galleon if they wanted to. With the tool, our level "prototyping" process has been made so much quicker, with each improving step in the game design being realized with more speed, flexibility and pragmatism than we ever would have hoped without it.

I don't think I'll ever look at mushrooms the same again. You certainly had your fun hiding these and, I might add, they're scattered about in such a way that they become most precious. The balance in Galleon forces the player to master Rhama and then managing Faith and Mihoko later on. With this food supply, it's no wonder they're all so thin! Did you toil a lot over difficulty and balance?

Game balancing, like level design/geography is another thing we really toiled over, if you can call it that! This was actually one of the really fun parts of working on the game, where we got to play a lot and really get to know our work. The placement and frequency of mushrooms and other pickups has been really, really influenced by our own play experience. The QA teams we have worked with have also made plenty of cool suggestions. I just hope we didn't make it too hard for people.

I thought I'd seen it all in terms of underwater gameplay with TR, until I went diving for Golem parts. The means to the end for each segment of each area is so ambitious (and that Mihoko air exchange...good god, thank you for that). During the development, did you ever find yourself wishing you weren't so ambitious? I mean, you had to live with this game for a long time. I can't imagine the bug testing.



As Galleon really has been our baby, we've stuck with and nurtured it like any good parents of a newborn. There never really was a question of toning things down or wishing we never started, call that stupidity or sheer bloody-mindedness if you will, ha ha. There have been some really tough times, and I've had to let some really talented people go throughout the duration of the project. That was a lot harder than any of the bug testing or graphical re-writes.

And with that...are you thinking franchise or will Confounding Factor begin a new project?

Regarding a possible franchise, you will have to ask our publishing partners about that matter. Should any news of future projects be released, I'm sure you will receive this in due course.

The voice acting in the game is superb and there's a ton of it. Did you record the VO recently or more towards the middle of the game's dev cycle?

We actually recorded the VO quite early on, as the script was written right at the beginning of the project. This helped flesh out the characters from the get-go and gave

us enthusiasm for realizing them further. Doing the VO near the start of the project also helped with lip-synching, where we matched the animation to the voice—not the other way around like many other productions in games and film.

As much as your game design feels completely your own, I sense a touch of that sticky Rare/Miyamoto quality. Has either had an effect on you?

Miyamoto-san is definitely a genius. I enjoy a lot of his games. I wish that other people either in or wanting to get into game development would research his design philosophy and education that bit more....

Think Lara and Rhama would hit it off or drive each other crazy?

I think they'd get along pretty well; they share quite a few similar interests after all, such as going to exotic places to steal stuff and, of course, laying down a goodly chunk of face smackage. Although, to be honest, I think even Rhama would be a bit wary of trying to get into a relationship with Lara. **play**



Faith healing. No, really. That's Faith...healing.

Mega Man X

Command Mission

An X-citing take on RPGs

Early in the preview build of Mega Man X Command Mission, a robot tells Mega Man X, "It should be refreshing to use your head in battle instead of just jumping around and shooting." Whether he's right or not won't be determined until the game is complete, but he makes a point: this RPG is definitely not the traditional action-oriented Mega Man that players are used to. "Mega Man X is an action game, but it still has a good story behind the action," says line producer Tatsuya Kitabayashi. "For this title, I really focused on the story of the Mega Man X series; that's [the reason for] the new direction of the series."

Indeed, the human-versus-replid storyline that has often subtly driven the X series is now coming to the forefront. A replid named General Epsilon is leading a rebellion for replid freedom with his Liberion Army, and it's up to X to infiltrate their Giga City Island base, link up with the resistance forces there, and put a stop to the uprising.

Aiding X on his mission are longtime ally Zero and Mega Man X7's Axl, along with four newcomers. Healer Cinnamon and ninja Marino make their mark as the series' first playable female characters, while the bulky Masimo impresses with his axe. Then there's the mysterious Spider, dressed in black and armed with deadly playing cards.

"...He's a bit of a shadowy character, a bounty hunter of sorts who...sometimes he's on your side, sometimes he's not, you know?" executive producer Tatsuya Minami remarks about Spider. "There's times when he's fighting for your team, but really what he's all about is making money and looking out for number one. So there's times when he will be there for you and...I'll leave it at that."

Battles in Command Mission are mostly cut from the traditional turn-based cloth, but the Mega Man influence is evident. Normal attacks come at no cost, but sub-weapons, such as missiles, consume WP (weapon points). Additionally, when the WP gauge reaches more than 50 percent (it increases each turn), each character can unleash an Action Trigger attack that involves real-time controller input. For Mega Man's Charge Buster, this just means holding down the button for a powered-up shot; for Zero, it involves inputting Street Fighter-like commands for his devastating Slash Combo; Axl uses specific button sequences for his Get DNA move, which lets him summon powerful enemy attacks. Furthermore, if more than 25 percent of an enemy's energy is drained during a single turn of combat, the button-mashing Final Strike can be utilized, decimating foes with upwards of 6000 HP damage.

Other features of MMXCM weren't implemented in the preview build but offer further innovation. A Party Hookup move permits characters to attack simultaneously using their main and sub-weapons; Force Metal power-ups let players customize characters with upgraded abilities and attacks; and Hyper Mode, according to Capcom, "kicks into gear when the action gets too close for comfort." With unique twists on a familiar universe that build upon a solid RPG foundation, Mega Man X Command Mission just may be as "refreshing" as suggested. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Capcom Production Studio 1
Publisher: Capcom
Available: August

"...this RPG is definitely not the traditional action-oriented Mega Man that players are used to."

Since characters are such an important element of RPGs, Capcom spent extra effort on MMXCM's character designs.



Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II

The Sith Lords

New advances in the Old Republic

Interview

Mike Gallo, producer, LucasArts

It's no secret that we were among the few who didn't go completely gaga over KOTOR. We liked it, even loved it in many ways (the game received our runner-up nod for RPG of the year) but we saw room for improvement. Not that the rest of the world had blinders on; it's just that when you've been weaned on Japanese series like Final Fantasy, Chrono Trigger, Vagrant Story, Suikoden, Wild Arms, Lunar, Grandia, Xenosaga and Phantasy Star, it takes a lot for a Western RPG to get under our skin. That said, we've certainly peeled back a layer for the sequel, which, judging by Mr. Gallo's answers, looks like it will lay all of our issues to rest and then some. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment Inc.
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: Winter

play: We really liked KOTOR, but not to the extent of the most of the press, so I'd like to begin by addressing aspects of the game we (cue the crickets) found needed improvement. There were repeating heads in the game—many attributed to key interactive characters. What causes this, and will it be rectified in KOTOR2?

Mike Gallo: We've heard this before, and it was one of the highest-priority items on our to-do list for Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords. The biggest issue with repeating heads was memory. We built a bunch of heads for the game, some of which only showed up in the PC version. We've already made several improvements and optimizations on the memory front, and this will allow us to have a greater variety of heads in a single area. We're also building a lot more heads, and that will give us variety throughout the game.

The game also loaded often. Even smallish, simplistic areas the Xbox normally wouldn't need time to load, loaded. Was this derivative of the port or something that needed ironing out in the engine?

It's actually a function of one of the key design elements of the game—the fact that you can engage in combat with any enemy within the game world without loading. *Everything* that the player can do in combat is available within the world without loading, and to do that, we had to give up fast load times in between areas. With all of that being said, we have already improved the load times, and hopefully they will



"We're using the same engine from the original KOTOR, and our focus has been on improving that engine in incremental steps."

—Mike Gallo producer, LucasArts

continue to get better throughout our optimization process.

Speaking to that, the game, while brilliant in more ways than not, looked very PC. Comparing it to similar wide-open fare on Xbox like Brute Force, Sudeki, Fable, BC, etc., it didn't have that Xbox sheen; ancillary models were quite wooden, textures on the simplistic side (opposed to normal or bump mapping) and the animation, while good, wasn't great. Will any or all of these be addressed in the sequel? Looking at Jade Empire, they've applied it all, so it is possible to have our galaxy and eat it too, yes?

We're using the same engine from the original KOTOR, and our focus has been on improving that engine in incremental steps. We do use bump mapping on our characters and critters where we get the biggest bang for the buck, and we do have reflection maps and all of that good stuff.

KOTOR's battle system reinvented turn-based fighting and breathed new life into the genre, something long overdue. Square will soon follow suit in its own way with FF XII. Are you doing anything new with this in KOTOR 2? We've added about 60 new feats and Force powers, and we've made some refinements to the battle system. We were quite pleased with the way the combat system worked, so we only approached it from a "facelift" point of view.

For example, you can now switch to an alternate weapon set right from the action menu. This setup is handled the same way on your character equip screen in a second slot. You can then switch on the fly between those two sets. It's a small change but it's quite useful.

Will KOTOR 2 include more vehicles or more fleshed-out racing sequences compared to the straightforward Swoop Bike races? What about Pazaak? Still in there? Actually, Pazaak was the favorite minigame from the first game. We are refining and changing all of the minigames from KOTOR I, and we'll get into that a bit more at a later date.

As many side quests or will it be a more linear journey? The plan is to have a comparable amount of side quests in The Sith Lords. I'm being intentionally vague, because we're not finished yet!

Will the Lightsaber-enhancing crystals and other upgradeable items be handled the same way?

There will be more of them, that's for certain, and they will still be handled in essentially the same fashion.

Will characters evolve Dark side/Light side in the same manner?

The Dark/Light side evolution was a huge part of KOTOR I and will play a big role in The Sith Lords. There will be some new things, such as the Light and Dark side choices having a bigger effect on certain party members, but the system is essentially the same with some enhancements.

At the end of the day, KOTOR was like crack for Star Wars aficionados, I mean, I've had countless emails telling me how high we are for pointing out any flaws. So you've obviously exceeded expectations within the massive Star Wars fan base. On the other side of the spectrum, however, our Japanese RPG fans found the game wanting artistically. Do you agree, care...need to care? You've been in the industry a long time and, coming from Konami, I'm sure you know where we're coming from...

I think a lot of this is based on the storyline. Our first goal, and it's one that I think that we nailed pretty good, was to let the player experience a *Star Wars*-scale story, and let them see and do the things that they remember being cool in the movies. Frankly, the team likes Japanese-style RPGs, and there are certainly some great ones out there—but we enjoy Canadian-style RPGs a whole lot more! There is an interesting difference in Eastern vs. Western RPGs—gameplay-wise, how they handle character development and, of course, artistic style.

Did you have any idea when the game was released how huge it would become?

We knew that we had a good product when we were about two weeks away from gold and the test team was still having a good time and talking about how cool certain elements were. When you can keep guys that happy for two years, you're doing something right. There was always that moment of "Hey, is this as good as we think? What happens if people don't get it or don't like the combat?" I think that the team at BioWare did a tremendous job of focusing on the areas that needed the most attention—we went through several natural revisions of the combat system, for example—and then having a great team of writers, designers, artists and programmers to pull it all together and make a great product.

I certainly appreciated the choice of a female lead. Will KOTOR 2 follow suit? Might we even get a more sumptuous female contingent?

There will be female characters in the game, including a female bounty hunter named Mira. Mira is a bounty hunter scout that scours the Republic and the Outer Rim in search of prey and cashes targets in for credits. While driven by a mercenary need for cash, Mira shies away from contract killing or performing contracts for the Exchange—in the past, she has killed only in self-defense, and even then, she has done so reluctantly.

Aside from being easy on the eyes, Mira also comes equipped with a bounty hunter specific weapon, similar to Boba Fett in the *Star Wars* movies—a wrist-mounted rocket launcher that allows her to selectively take out a single opponent (with concussion darts, tranquilizer darts) or decimate hordes of enemies with buster rockets and ion rockets—perfect for leveling the playing field when enemies decide to gang up on the player.

Will PC again be the lead platform or will the new game be built for Xbox from the ground up?

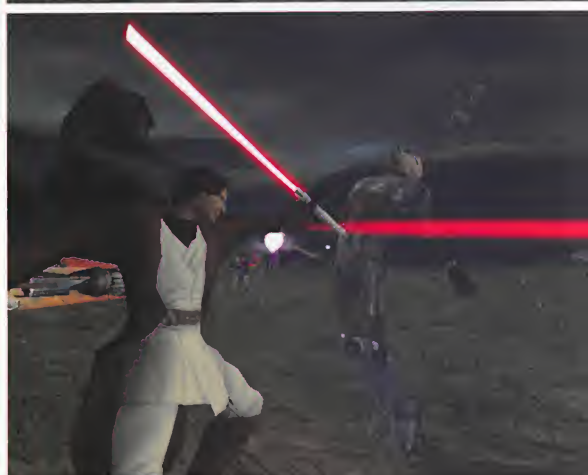
The Sith Lords is being built using the same toolset from BioWare, and we'll be launching on both platforms simultaneously.

Speaking of PC, things seem about to take another sizeable technological leap, so how do you balance that? Was the game a bigger hit on Xbox or PC? Does that factor in on the sequel's creation?

It does factor in when you're talking about sequels, but the game did very well on both platforms the first time around and the simultaneous launch will help the PC side of things. On the tech side, we have to make sure that we're compatible with all of the new cards, but our minimum spec is going to remain about the same as the first game.

It's been real, Mike; great speaking with you. We can't wait to get our hands on the game. How about a Yoda-Fu mini game!? That'd be something...

Thanks! We leave all of the Yoda-Fu stuff for the movies! play

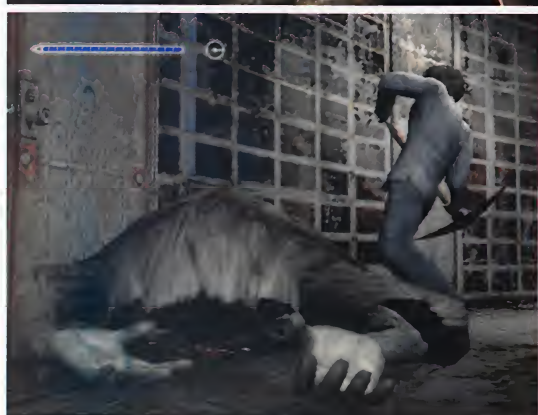


KOTOR 2 will take turn-based fighting to even more exciting new levels.

Silent Hill 4

The Room

The darkest secret of them all



Examining the hunched-over figure caught in smoking rubble of a burned-out building, you're told that "a charred doll's body is sitting in the wheelchair." Of course, there's a cryptic message awaiting your curiosity: "Though my body be destroyed, I will not let you pass here. To prepare for the receiver of Wisdom... I cut my body into five pieces and hid them in the darkness." Well then, it's time to head into the eerie forest, confront some weirdly floating spirits, twisted two-headed monsters, decaying dogs with long, drooping tongues that drag along the ground, and find those dislocated parts to open the "path to below..."

Whatever that "below" turns out to be will likely contain yet another string of gruesome, creepy images and hallucinatory encounters. Be prepared for bodies being burned alive, fleshy beasts being beaten senseless with blunt objects, and tortured souls crying out for relief; the emotion in their faces chills. This is, after all, a Silent Hill game, the fourth in a series that has no qualms going for the extreme in horror.

Lost in this disturbing world is Henry, a seemingly average guy who wakes up one day to find his apartment closed off with locks and chains. The only exit is a portal in the bathroom, which leads to random settings that eventually wind back to Henry's place, subtly rearranged. Here you see through his eyes in a

first-person perspective, adding an element of claustrophobia and heightened tension. Walk up to look out the window and you get a taste of the masterful artistry and clever visual touches the game exhibits.

For everyone crying about how awful the control scheme has been in the past, can you dry your eyes for a nicely improved retooling? The play seems faster and less heavy-handed, but as a fan who has never been distracted by the character movement before, it's all it needs to be within the context of the game. Gone is the pause screen for items and weapons selection, replaced by a scrolling real-time menu.

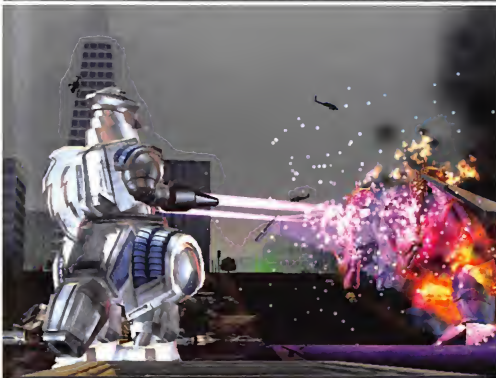
After the unsettling experience of the first Silent Hill, this series began to lose its hold. Parts two and three were well crafted, but the vile spirit just wasn't as crushing, the sense of dread replaced by more of the typical. What I've played so far in Silent Hill 4 left me disturbed. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: September

"This is, after all, a Silent Hill game, the fourth in a series that has no qualms going for the extreme in horror."

The game warns that you may deem some images "Cruel." That would be a tame description.

Godzilla: Save the Earth

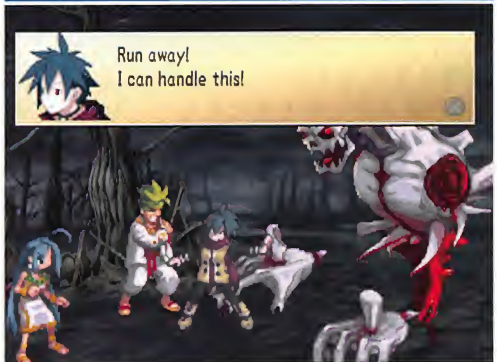


Try as they might, no one has been able to successfully translate the cheesy splendor and omni-powerful city-smashing glory of *Godzilla* and his many foes into a video game. Sega came close with *Godzilla Generations Max Impact* on Dreamcast—but no big, rubber cigar. In their second attempt after the average *Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters*, Atari and Pipeworks are determined to deliver the goods, and we think that the new adventure mode is exactly what the lip-synching doctor ordered. Gamera was not available for comment. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Pipeworks
Publisher: Atari
Available: November



Phantom Brave



Following in the cute but brain-draining footsteps of *Disgaea* and *La Pucelle Tactics* comes *Phantom Brave*, Nippon Ichi Software's first self-published U.S. release. *Phantom Brave* takes the strategy-RPG formula several steps further: not only have the traditional grid-based battlefields been replaced by go-anywhere circles, but the gameplay now revolves around "confining" phantoms into seemingly benign battlefield objects like rocks and trees, thus summoning them into battle. Objects can also be used as weapons or be utilized for the protection attributes they emit. Complex? Indeed. **CH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Nippon Ichi Software
Publisher:NIS America
Available: August

OutRun 2



Old-school gameplay and modern technology merge together to create *OutRun 2*, the long-overdue direct sequel to Sega's coin-op classic. Forget about that sim stuff; this is arcade racing the way it's meant to be. Aside from the stunning graphics—worlds apart from the original game, naturally—the game's big draws are its branching arcade mode (where you race against the clock, just like in the original) and the ability to choose from eight authentic Ferrari models. *OutRun 2* also features a mission mode (with 100 missions) and online play that will support at least four players. **CH**

System: Xbox
Developer: AM2/Sumo Digital
Publisher: Sega
Available: October

Halo 2



It's easy to see why *Halo 2* is the world's most anticipated game. Literally every facet of the game has been tuned to perfection as MGS and Bungie grow ever closer to unleashing what could very well be the definitive first-person shooter. Even moreso than the original, they are clearly exhibiting a shrewd attention to detail. Just look at the textures. Not sure if that's normal- or bump-mapping, but every nook and cranny seems to have depth. Combined with masterful single-player and online play, *Halo 2* seems almost unstoppable as the most powerful new brand in gaming. Hope that tattoo was right! **DH**

System: Xbox
Developer: Bungie
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: November 9



Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams



How Avalanche has managed to sculpt a platformer of this magnitude inside of two years defies the laws of game development. Must be the air in Utah; either that, or the lack of willing females has given them oodles of spare time to dream up weird s---t. If you liked Tak, Tak 2 will cause your head to explode, and if you don't know Tak from a doorknob, you'll be damn happy to meet him. They've pumped so much Juju magic into this one we're saving it for a big blowout next month. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Avalanche Software
Publisher: THQ
Available: October



Tony Hawk's Underground 2



Now with more THUG! Neversoft has been locked away for so many years making T. Hawk games, they've started to snap a little, and luckily for us, their psychosis has ended up in THUG 2. As they veer farther and farther from reality, the games just get better and better. The latest hooks, playing as icons indigenous with each city and tagging, to go along with bigger, crazier environments (and maybe even a few old-school Dog Town folk), do a body—of your own design—good. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Neversoft
Publisher: Activision
Available: October

Killzone



Killzone's going up against what's probably the largest lineup of heavy-hitting first-person shooters yet on console. Some of what it's got going for it: a very cool futuristic setting riding nicely on its sci-fi appeal, a really good story setup, a selection of four characters who offer completely separate strengths. Weapon hounds will like the two-dozen stash available, which prove less or more capable in the hands of the character most suited for a particular brand of firepower. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Guerrilla
Publisher: Sony
Available: Fall 2004

Mortal Kombat: Deception



Don't be a hater: Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance was actually a really good 3D fighter, and Mortal Kombat: Deception looks even better. You'll see most of the essential familiarities with Deadly Alliance right away. Dig deeper and you'll uncover much more interaction with the dual-level environments, additional fatalities and strategies, and extra modes of play to keep the replay high. For those thirsting to extract spines over the net, one of the biggest new additions is extensive online play involving all the new multiplayer options. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: October



Snowblind



Interesting little tidbit on Snowblind: the game actually began as what was going to be the Deus Ex action spin-off, Clan Wars. What it's become is a free-roaming first-person action game, set in the near future of a communist China. As the leader of a group of super soldiers, you fire off commands and attend to their wounds, provide protection and even go in for rescues when necessary. Online play will include up to 16 combatants. I like what I've seen so far; it'll be interesting to see what Crystal Dynamics, known for their Kain series, will do with an FPS. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Publisher: Eidos
Available: Fall 2004

Forza Motorsport



If you're knowledgeable enough to recognize the "Forza" in Microsoft's stringent racing sim, Forza Motorsport, this one's especially for you—the pure racing fan who demands uncompromising realism and attention to detail. And no game on console has every dug this far into a true physics model. As a late gift to Xbox owners pinning for their Gran Turismo, Forza Motorsport offers such highlights as an exhaustive list of licensed cars that are actually destructible, exact courses modeled on real settings, and enough upgrade and tweaking options to satisfy you for months. **BF**

System: Xbox
Developer: Microsoft
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: 2005

Rise of the Kasai



Building on the proprietary combat that made The Mark of Kri one of '02's best PS2 games, Bottlerocket is taking their show on the multiplayer and online road by introducing dual-character control to strategically overwhelm (well, that's the plan anyway) the enemy. In single-player, the computer AI will assist. Elsewhere, it's all about the new hotty, Tati, and more of the same, only bigger and more epic. Hope we get some big, nasty bosses this time. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Bottlerocket Entertainment
Publisher: SCEA
Available: Q1 2005

Scrapland



It's time once again to crawl into the mind of American McGee in Mercury Steam's Scrapland, a new third-person action-adventure set in a robotic world that exists within a tiny asteroid inside a debris field thousands of miles wide. As stunning as it looks, it's said to take the free-from gameplay formula of games such as GTA to a whole new level. Marrying that expanse with this much model integrity is obviously a testament to having Xbox and PC as exclusive platforms. You play as the unassuming D-Tritus, a robo cop investigating a series of bizarre murders. Didn't know you could kill robots; should be an interesting premise. **DH**

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Mercury Steam/American McGee
Publisher: Enlight Software Ltd.
Available: Q4



Shaman King: Power of Spirit



Before you dismiss Konami's upcoming Shaman King game as just another kiddie-show spin off, at least sample the goods. I still wake up early to watch Saturday morning cartoons and Shaman King is in my regular rotation. The game combines witty repartee via manga-style images layered over poly backgrounds (with mucho exaggeration) with nicely devised versus battles featuring plenty of mojo-tastic real-time components. Yu-Gi-Oh—now there's an enigma. All those cards hurt the Flea's tiny brain! **DH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: September

Guilty Gear

X2 #Reload

Only feel guilty if you don't enjoy this game

Let's keep this simple: if you own an Xbox and still appreciate fantastic 2D fighting games, then Guilty Gear X2 #Reload is for you. Although it's not much different than the PS2 version of GGX2 that hit last year—the game's only possible fault—this enhanced version does add subtle balance tweaking to the game system and offers one thing the PS2 edition never did: online gameplay.

If you're unfamiliar with Guilty Gear, then be prepared to get blown away—and possibly overwhelmed—by the incredible depth of this underrated fighting franchise. It all starts with the absolutely awesome animated intro, rockin' '80s-inspired soundtrack (metal references abound) and fantastic, albeit truly bizarre, character design. Before you even begin losing yourself in the nuances of control, you can spend hours just marveling at the anime-style visual overload, where flashy effects pierce the high-res backgrounds as characters' outfits blow in the wind and sunbeams poke through trees while woodland creatures scurry about. I'd nearly forget that multilayered 2D like this still existed.

Once you do choose one of the 23 characters (not counting variations) and get absorbed into the intense gameplay, you'll discover that there's no fighting game

deeper. Faultless Defense, Roman Cancels, False Roman Cancels, Negative Penalties, One-Hit Kills...it all amounts to intricate technique that will separate the fighting purist from the button-masher. Although the less skilled can still jump right in and start throwing out visually impressive moves right away, should you take the time to master this game, it will reward you.

In addition to the typical arcade and versus modes, GGX2 #Reload also features a vast, branching Story mode, a somewhat dull Medal of Millionaires mode (collect medals for points as you pummel opponents), a secret-unlocking Survival mode and the super-challenging Mission mode—featuring 50 missions more than the old PS2 GGX2 did.

With so much depth and so much visual and aural quality, the only reasons to pass up on GGX2 #Reload are if you already played the PS2 version to death, have no interest in playing online or just don't like the genre. **Chris Hoffman**

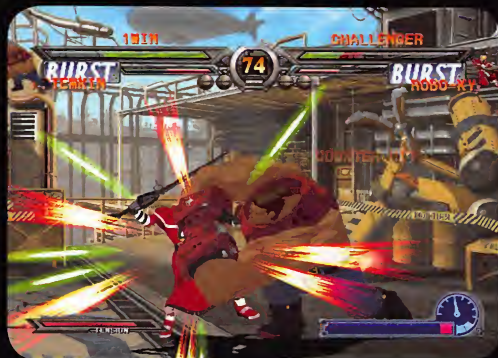
System: Xbox

Developer: Arc System Works

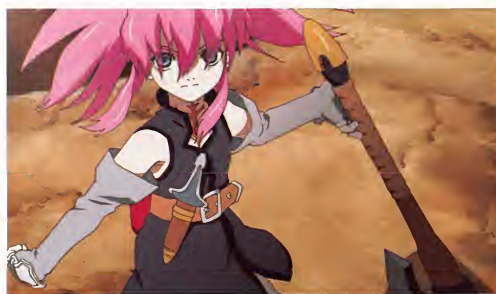
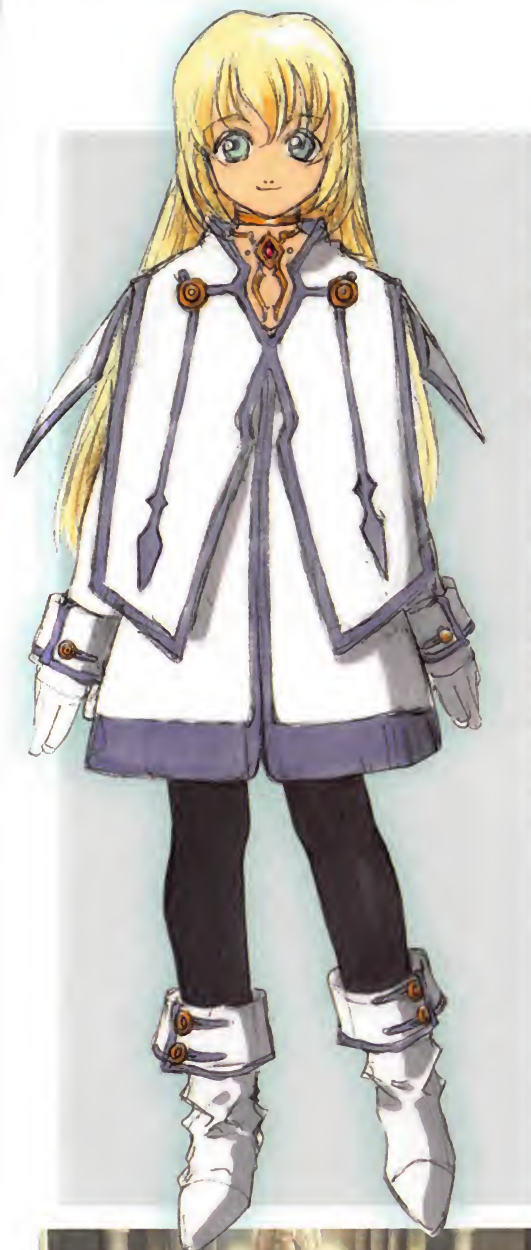
Publisher: Majesco

Available: September

"...be prepared to get blown away—and possibly overwhelmed—by the incredible depth of this underrated fighting franchise."



Use the power of the Tension Gauge to destroy your opponents in a flash of graphical brilliance



Tales of Symphonia

Worth playing for the tale alone

Numerous elements are essential to create an incredible RPG—amazing graphics, a great story, memorable characters and a refined battle system among them. Tales of Symphonia is a highly enjoyable RPG, but it falls a bit short of “incredible.” Hey, three out of four ain’t bad.

TOS’ greatest strengths lie in its multi-faceted characters and its compelling story. To go into depth would be to deprive players of experiencing the intrigue-filled tale firsthand, but the story runs much deeper than the initial journey of regeneration that fledgling swordsman Lloyd Irving, “The Chosen” Colette and their numerous allies find themselves on, evolving into a twisting, turning quest fraught with religious controversy, ethical questions and issues of prejudice and sacrifice. Admittedly, the questioning of divinity has become cliché and some plot twists are predictable, but the story succeeds here through strength of character and powerful emotion, aided significantly by quality voice acting (although it’s rather weird to hear Liquid Snake’s voice coming from Kratos’ mouth).

Symphonia is also absolutely gorgeous, looking like the figurative cartoon come to life. I can’t ever recall cel-shading being used to such grand effect in an RPG before. Almost every city or dungeon scene looks like a meticulously crafted hand-drawn still, yet it’s constructed in full 3D, enhanced with intricacies like fish swimming in a pond or fine detailing of a rug. Too bad the bland, pop-up-

filled overworld doesn’t follow suit.

The bigger issue, however, lies in the combat. Borrowing the side-view, real-time, action-oriented battle system of previous Tales games, this unique system’s heart is in the right place even if its mind isn’t. Aside from having access to limited abilities at any one time, the problem is that the player only directly controls one party member, with the remaining three being handled by computer AI—which isn’t quite up to task. Sure, you can micro-manage to a certain extent, and there are numerous AI options, but it’s hard to get the desired result. Even opting to play in multiplayer mode (cool in concept) falls flat since the screen only focuses on the lead character. Fortunately, these flaws really only become significant if you’re under-leveled, while other gameplay elements, like the creative dungeon puzzles, counterbalance with massive fun.

The positive aspects of Tales of Symphonia make it easy to overlook any faults the game may have, as the breathtaking art and deep story collaborate to coerce you ever onward. Gamers with a ‘Cube as their sole console should especially take note—well-made exclusive RPGs don’t arrive every day. **Chris Hoffman B+**

System: GameCube
Developer: Namco Tales Studio
Publisher: Namco
Available: July

“...a twisting, turning quest fraught with religious controversy, ethical questions and issues of prejudice and sacrifice.”

The anime-inspired character designs are nothing short of fantastic.





Spider-Man 2

City slinger

With massive environments comes great responsibility. On the next wave of consoles, seamless metropolis games are going to be pant-wetting experiences, but for now, developers must sacrifice assorted bells and whistles (such as realistic ancillary models, shadows and fine detail) to achieve this level of freedom. A fair exchange? In this case, most def; and even more so than in True Crime, THUG or, in my opinion, even GTA. If the name of the game is immersion, fun and a connection with the environment, Spidey wins the prize in my book. Treyarch delivers all of the above with flying red and blue colors.

What a great idea, applying Spider-Man to the open-world formula—taking the best aspects of the genre and rolling them into a game unlike any other. With the entire city open and visible from the outset—a mind-blowing achievement on the current wave of consoles—Treyarch has crafted a massive adventure rife with throngs of diverse gameplay, from ultra-deep melee to crazy platforming stunts (aerial exploits on and around Lady Liberty just rock) to pizza delivery. Spider-Man 2 is simply massive, and if you can see it you can reach it...run to it, climb to it, swing to it...hell, you can jump on a car and hitch a ride to

it. If you've ever wondered what it would be like to be Spider-Man, this is as close as you're ever going to get (sans locking lips with MJ). There's no escaping the token and somewhat repetitive mini-ops inherent with the genre—foiling hold-ups, car jackings, minor injuries, police chases, etc. (which exist for the express purpose of earning hero points used to purchase moves)—and the banter at street level is akin to a retarded parrot, but the meat of the game is extremely well laid. Picture a GTA-like flow with branching storylines and actual cinematics, high flying acrobatics that evolve to new levels of addiction, and a level of freedom never before imagined, and you've got the perfect stage for the web-slinger. It takes a few hours to get to the good stuff, but you'll be so glued to just being Spider-Man it barely matters, as the soul of this game lies in the web swinging, the ever-evolving melee and web controls, and the situation-based scenarios, battling against anti-villains and crackpots like Black Cat and the irrepressible Mysterio. Magneto who? **Dave Halverson** ▶

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Treyarch
Publisher: Activision
Available: June



"If the name of the game is immersion, fun and a connection with the environment, Spidey wins the prize in my book."



Spidey gets down and dirty city-wide.



Mega Man

Anniversary Collection

Too much of a good thing? No way.



The never-before-released-on-console arcade games are the graphical highlight.

“...the fantastic level design, precise control and underlying weapon-swiping game theory are second to none.”

Man 8 emulated instead of the superior Saturn version? And I hardly have the words to express my dismay when I unlocked the “anime episode” exclusive to the PS2 version only to discover it was an episode of the appalling U.S. cartoon.

The good in Mega Man Anniversary Collection, however, far outweighs the bad. Most of the flaws are easily ignored. The games are still as good as gold; even the GC controls can be adapted to with a little practice. Mega Man Anniversary Collection might not be perfect, but it still provides 10 awesome games in one convenient package. That’s something not to be missed.

Chris Hoffman PS2: A-, GC: B

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Capcom/Atomic Planet
Publisher: Capcom
Available: June



Old-school gaming doesn’t get much better than Mega Man Anniversary Collection. Containing the Blue Bomber’s eight classic action-platformers, along with his two rather obscure arcade titles, this compilation represents the best the gaming industry has had to offer from years gone by. For their time, the graphics were cutting-edge; the music compositions still sound better than most of what is produced today; the fantastic level design, precise control and underlying weapon-swiping game theory are second to none. And the series’ most spectacular highlights, like Dr. Wily’s transformation into an alien at the end of Mega Man 2, create some of the most memorable moments in all of gaming.

The original Mega Man, of course, introduced the innovative formula that set the standard. This was refined to perfection in Mega Man 2, the game that most (including series creator Keiji Inafune) consider the franchise’s crowning achievement. New additions continued throughout the series, constantly adding new twists, like the slide maneuver and new power-up suits, but never straying far from the winning benchmark. The unlockable arcade titles are a very welcome addition—they may distill the action down to the boss battles, they may be way too easy thanks to infinite credits, but they look great and provide a new type of fun, especially since they had virtually no distribution in arcades. From that first encounter with Cutman in the original Mega Man to the final Mega Buster shot that takes out Dr. Wily in the Power Fighters coin-op, it’s all good.

Unfortunately, several little flaws in the presentation build up to dull the gleam on this otherwise sparkling collection. They’re really not significant enough to go into detail, but the optional remixed music is poorly implemented, the navigational hints suffer from one of the worst translations in memory, and the lack of a control config is quite unfortunate—especially in the GC version, where the jump and shoot buttons are reversed from their original positions. Another quandary: why is the PlayStation version of Mega





Crimson Tears

Cyber marionettes unite!

Some (make that many) will brand *Crimson Tears* a clear case of style over substance, although such a distinction really depends on personal preference. If you grew up with and still like arcade-style action from Japan, a well-honed dose with a dungeon-crawling core may be at the top of your wish list. On the other hand, all of the elegant design and back-story in the world can't change the fact that *Crimson Tears* is a repetitive, somewhat rudimentary, action game. Me? Stick Dungeon

Explorer on the TurboGrafx under my nose and I won't come up for days, so be warned. Dream Factory (Tobal, The Bouncer, Kakuto Chojin) has chiseled a career out of crafting such tasty morsels, historically opting for variations on simplistic themes with an emphasis on style and vivid characters over complexity. And, as such, *Crimson Tears* may be their best game yet, offering up three distinctive bio-weapons left to their own devices in a straightforward gambit against a gaggle of monsters. Kadie is the über-

"Given the complexity of a lot of what's out there, it's always nice to just sit back and beat on things..."

sexy, cute and bubbly melee expert; Amber, the sultry blade user; and Tokio, the token buff munitions guy. Originally created for peaceful applications, their creator's last words suggest that, given they must resort to violence (the city's been overrun by monsters; you know the drill), he wishes he'd never created them, imparting a sense of isolation and confusion similar to the camaraderie between Roy, Pris, Leon and Zhora in *Blade Runner*—very cool. Nevertheless, one thing leads to another and ultimately dungeons filled with monsters—so a hacking we will go.

Crimson Tears certainly isn't devoid of any nuances. Beyond its stunning cel-shaded cinematics, the trio can rescue one another (should one of the team fall anywhere in a dungeon, you can activate another to rescue them in a do-or-die-type fashion); there's a central city akin to Baldur's Gate used to initiate side quests and purchase various healing agents and armaments; and each ever-changing dungeon presents its own unique set of obstacles and monsters. Still, *Crimson Tears* is mostly about throttling monsters and character management. You like—then definitely check it out; you don't—definitely don't. Given the complexity of a lot of what's out there, it's always nice to just sit back and beat on things, and when it looks this nice, well, if you're so inclined, this is one of the better pick-up-and-play games around. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Dream Factory
Publisher: Capcom
Available: July



When Kaede overheats, it's kabob bad guys, use coolant, in that order.





The Legend of Zelda

Four Swords Adventures

A Link to your past

“Switching between the four Links is essentially the core play mechanic...”



The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures poses an interesting question: how can a game that's essentially a patchwork of old parts with new effects on top engross me in this day and age to a degree that it's impossible to put down? It's like an old sports car totally modded out vs. a slick new 2004 model. It's hard to say which is better; luckily, thanks to Nintendo, we still get to drive both.

As you're probably well aware, FSA is both GBA link cable and four-player compatible. The GBA link is a cool enough innovation, I guess, if you should find yourself wanting to partake with three other willing participants with GBA in hand (and whoever you are, please write in); however, in this case I'd rather dine on *Fear Factor*. Unless you're cool with the kind of frustration playing a classic Zelda adventure with other humans can bring, this is so a one-player game. Switching between the four Links is essentially the core play mechanic and, as such, a motor reaction in tune with the design. Having to bark out where to go or what to do among four players is akin to a hot poker in the eye. And as for plugging a 32-bit handheld into my 128-bit console...whoever is cooking up this crap up at Nintendo needs a hobby. As quaint as the GBA graphics are in the sub-rooms, aren't we old-school enough with the SNES visuals? This is a job for the DS, not the GC.

Moving on, there's plenty of variation on the theme to go around. Aside from the brilliant four-Link system, which is woven

into the game to a miraculous end, there are new zooming maps, wonderfully integrated particle effects and a streamlined inventory system to emphasize a more seamless flow. Instead of constantly cycling through your inventory for the right tool, items are placed strategically throughout the game conducive to each puzzle and/or enemy, so you always have the right tool for the job, be it fiery lava pool or large mace-swinging behemoth. Bid a fond farewell to Rupees too. The new collectibles, called Force Gems, have a higher purpose: powering up your four swords until they're a fire-spewing force to be reckoned with. Otherwise, this is a throwback through and through, which, combined with these new wrinkles, is pretty much the recipe for video game heroin.

It's hard to fathom how a game that speaks through elementary text, not voice, with characters that look like the ones I drew on my Trapper Keeper in fifth grade (barking such eloquent lines as “Link, did you defeat that giant stone eye-thing?”), can still hold me captive. But, somehow, it does. Which begs the question: what if I could have this same game completely rendered in 3D—the same exact game only with a proper perspective via a three-dimensional gamespace? Finally, a good use for that Pikmin engine! **Dave Halverson A-**

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



These old boss battles never get old. In fact, no part of this game comes across as stale.



Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent **A**
 Very Good **B**
 Average **C**
 Poor **D**
 Worthless **F**



Game of the Month

» Zelda: Four Swords Adventures p 055

"...a throwback through and through...pretty much the recipe for video game heroin."

Also notice...



Guilty Gear X2 #Reload

p 050

How many other fighting games feature a witch with an electric guitar who tears her top off when she wins?



Spider-Man 2

p 052

The highest-rated comic book movie in history gets a companion game worthy of the namesake.



Thief: Deadly Shadows

TDS on Xbox isn't without flaws (slight frame rate hits and almost useless maps), but in the world of stealth, there are few better games. You don't just play this game, you live it. Beyond the sick visuals courtesy of the juiced Deus Ex IW engine; the hyper-keen AI (those around you react differently to various levels of sound), living medieval environments and especially the fact that confrontation almost always ends up with Garrett face down (as it should be) make this the quintessential sneaker. The way the AI reacts to your specific presence is eerily keen. With immersion akin with the best claustrophobic fare around, like Splinter Cell and Butcher Bay, combined with the newly added village roaming, this is Ion Storm's best work to date, and that's saying something. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: PC, Xbox (reviewed)

Developer: Ion Storm

Publisher: Eidos

Available: June



Environments like this are what being a gamer is all about.





Psi-Ops

Psi-Ops is a first-rate sci-fi adventure made captivating through evolving layers of telekinetic gameplay powered by Havok for a level of physics and immersion that's as close to real (or surreal, I suppose) as you're bound to come to using your mind as a WMD. Assuming the role of Nick Scyer, a man with a dark past and lethal mind, Psi-Ops is rooted in WWII-era mind control and a terrorist organization looking to finish what the Third Reich started—very nasty business. Through a series of flashbacks (just follow the hairstyles), Nick's Psi-abilities are slowly introduced into the game—ranging from straight telekinesis (a most gratifying mechanic, hurling limp bodies at will) to mind control to the always-festive pyrokinesis—as the wonderfully devised levels deem necessary. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox (reviewed)
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: June



Karaoke Revolution Vol. 2

Although Karaoke Revolution Vol. 2 is every bit as much of a success on a technical level as its predecessor, where the original found appeal through a great list of generally beloved songs, the sequel falters with a play list dominated by flavor-of-the-week Top 40 tunes with variety coming by way of few crusty oldies, along with the odd country song. Even with 35 tracks, I can count on one hand the number that have the quality and longevity to make them worthwhile for karaoke. Then again, if I were a junior high girl, maybe my opinion would differ. Additionally, the arcade mode has been removed from the single-player game, replaced by the medley mode, which, though fun, has little long-term value. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Konami
Available: July



McFarlane's Evil Prophecy

I don't dislike basic beat 'em up gameplay—in fact, I love a mindless beater when the time is right—but there is a right way and a wrong way to make these games work. Crimson Tears, Hunter the Reckoning Redeemer: right way; McFarlane's EP: wrong way...very wrong way. It's hard to believe this is a Konami game, as it looks and feels more like the type of crap that put 3DO six feet under. The character design, models and animation are painfully bad, and the gameplay is so arduous it's almost insulting, amidst the worst level design perhaps ever. Let's pray this hammers the final nail into the Todd McFarlane-based vid game coffin. **Dave Halverson D-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Hawaii
Publisher: Konami
Available: June



Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow is stealth gaming—with an emphasis squarely on stealth—at its uncompromising best: fastidiously laid down, inventively presented, established with a keen eye for detail. The Xbox version, released a few months ago, clearly and expectedly takes the audio/visual crown, but new additions like end-of-level statistics and some minor level tweakings strike a plus on what is already a superb achievement. Coming down from the slow boil of the single-player experience, Pandora Tomorrow shoots right back up with the insidiously engaging multiplayer component, pitting a team of mercenaries against spies. Much more than a visceral game of reflex, it trains you to observe its world and follow its fair, unflinching rules. There's precious little out there like it. **Brady Flechter A-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Ubisoft
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: June



Street Fighter Anniversary Collection

When the worst thing I can say about this game is that it's too bad that a Street Fighter Alpha title wasn't included, then I know I have a fantastic old-school fighting compilation on my hands. Not that it's perfect—more options for SFII's versus mode would have been nice (handicapping, background select), and the PS2 pad isn't an ideal tool for the action at hand—but the classic, precise, once-revolutionary combat of Hyper Street Fighter II (featuring all variant SFII characters) and Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike (among the deepest 2D fighters ever) will still keep you playing until your thumbs are sore. The presentation and bonus features are top notch—Capcom even included the entire SFII anime movie. **Chris Hoffman A-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: August



Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow

The concept's hugely appealing—you're the first-person leader of a four-man team of widely skilled military types, individually commanding them to perform all sorts of high-risk tasks in volatile situations. Like the last game, your team really isn't all that widely effective and functional, inevitably creating a feeling of going through the motions on autopilot; but more complex AI routines and better scripted scenarios do definitely help. Improvements on lighting and a basic engine clean-up go a long way in upping the appeal, but what is most important here are the new levels, multiplayer modes and maps. Don't be misled: this isn't a casual update. Fans will eat it up, but Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow still has plenty of room to grow for the inevitable sequel. **Brady Flechter B-**

System: Xbox
Developer: Ubisoft
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: August



Full Spectrum Warrior

With originality and a push for authenticity as its big draws, Full Spectrum Warrior is not your typical action game with a military spin. That it first surfaced as an actual training program for the U.S. Army is a telling descriptor of what you're getting into. That you're never directly firing a single shot tells of a game even further removed from the norm. As a game of strategy and calculated observation, you stand in the center of a mass of troops, moving with their approach through an Iraq-like battleground of enemy soldiers. The idea is to set up flanks, constantly stay under cover, wait for open shots as all hell breaks loose—an engaging but undeniably predictable course. The presentation is handled so well that you end up disregarding how ultimately arbitrary the setup can be.

Brady Flechter B

System: Xbox
Developer: Pandemic
Publisher: THQ
Available: June



The sights and sounds of war are so well replicated, it's easy to look past the prosaic nature of the march.



Puyo Pop Fever

The Puyo Pop series (or Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine or whatever you want to call it) has been around for ages, and now it's landed on the GameCube courtesy of Sonic Team. So what's new this time? For starters, a seriously fruity aesthetic—the bright, silly, sugary-sweet characters and story seem to be crafted for 4-year-olds. Fortunately, a game like this isn't about graphics, so if you look past the appallingly cute veneer, you'll get plenty of the cerebral, combo-crazy fun this series is known for. Activating the new easy-combo Fever Mode is an interesting concept, but it's a bit on the cheap side, while the variations on Endless mode provide the most fun in the single-player experience.

Chris Hoffman B-

System: GameCube
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega
Available: July



Driv3r

Whatever influential title you can point to as far superior, Driv3r stands alone as a sweeping failure in some of the most basic of elements. It fails as eye candy. Its heavy dialogue is soporific. AI is inconsistent and mostly incapable. There are harsh technical snafus around every poorly designed corner. Even the more inventive ideas stall from unacceptable control. For a reputable series moving to capture the manic energy of a Hollywood action thriller, you have to wonder how it ended up so utterly deflated. At the very least, the linear, mission-based dominance should afford some exciting setups, but alas, you're merely trudging through random half-baked chases and shootouts. Driv3r is a rare big-ticket failure. **Brady Flechter D+**

System: Xbox
Developer: Reflections
Publisher: Atari
Available: June



Samurai Warriors

Since Koei has essentially taken the PlayStation 2 version of Samurai Warriors, their Dynasty Warriors spin-off, and plopped it directly onto Xbox, I'm going to take a line from my PS2 review that ran in our May issue: if you're one of Dynasty Warriors' many fans and can't wait to continue the slaughter, you'll be absolutely in heaven here. The only new features are even more (!) enemies on the screen at once and Dolby Digital sound. Of course, this is in addition to the existing numerous playable characters, customization options and loads of gameplay modes, including co-op play. Too bad this doesn't change the fact that central gameplay is little more than repetitive button-mashing that grows old quickly. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: Xbox
Developer: Omega Force
Publisher: Koei
Available: July

Astro Boy: Omega Factor

Review

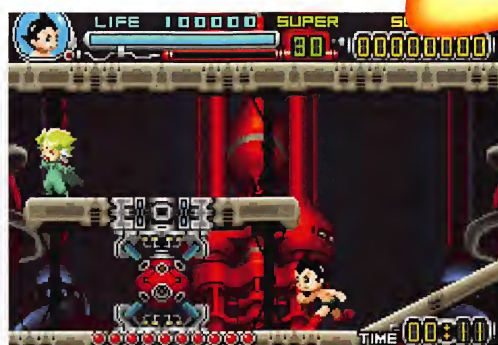
This tiny robot packs a lot of fun

Astro Boy: Omega Factor might not have quite as much innovation as some of Treasure's most revered titles, but it has, without a doubt, just as much technique, challenge and—in particular—fun. The enjoyment starts with Astro's wealth of standard and special moves: basic punches, combo-causing kicks that knock enemies into each other, long-range finger beams, a crucial evasive dash maneuver, super arm cannon attacks, a multidirectional machine gun and a high-invincible screen-spanning punch combo. These moves provide not only an abundance of ways to enjoy Astro's classic cartoon-based quest, but are also necessary for taking out the plentiful enemies and screen-filling bosses. These giant brutes can often be beaten by sheer force instead of pure skill if you switch over to easy mode, but opt for the standard difficulty and you'll be in pattern-

filled heaven. The shooter stages offer some nice variety, while a surprisingly sophisticated story and a nice character growth feature add further depth. Also noteworthy is the fact that after you've seemingly finished the game (with a bad ending), you'll be encouraged to go through it again with an expanded story, added exploration and a few new stages in a "second quest." In many games, I'd consider such an action a cheap way to extend the game's lifespan, but Astro Boy is so enjoyable, I don't mind one bit.

Chris Hoffman A-

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Hitmaker/Treasure
Publisher: Sega
Available: August



Mario Golf: Advance Tour

Review

Does Nintendo ever let you down? Sometimes, sure, but not often, and it can be said with certainty that Camelot has never made a bad Mario Golf game for them. Their latest, Mario Golf: Advance Tour, is one of the best entries in the series to date. With its wonderfully satisfying mini-RPG elements that bring welcome depth and structure to its lovingly detailed Nintendo world, this is a game that just loves to be played. The control is simple and fun, while still allowing skill to shine through, and the graphics are a treat with a nice sense of depth and 3D detailing. Mode 7 lives on. The game's focus is less on playing with the Nintendo characters than the GameCube version, but there is certainly that element to this game. You can also link to the 'Cube and play your leveled-up character and more. **Michael Hobbs A-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Camelot Software Planning

Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



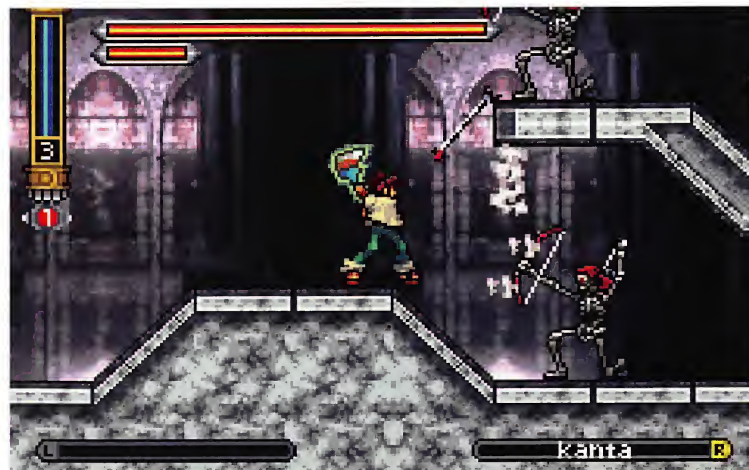
Shaman King: Master of Spirits

Preview

When I popped Shaman King into my GBA, I had no doubt I was playing a Konami game. The question was: which one? If I didn't know any better, I'd think I was playing Castlevania. But that, most definitely, is a good thing. From the detailed backgrounds and familiar character animation to the ability-bestowing spirit power-ups, Shaman King takes a page directly from the Transylvanian vampire-hunter's manual and applies it to anime. Since each spirit grants protagonist Yoh new abilities, such as extinguishing flames or pushing blocks, the mechanics constantly evolve and the sprawling game world continues to expand, leading to new platform-laden areas and challenging boss battles. Finally, an anime series is on track to becoming a compelling GBA game. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: KCE Japan

Publisher: Konami
Available: September



The Legend of Zelda The Minish Cap

Preview

The twist in this all-new 2D installment of the legendary Zelda series is the Minish Cap, a talking hat that lets Link shrink to microscopic size. This new mechanic essentially enables two distinct game worlds—one of normal size and one populated by the troubled Minish people. As always, various tools will help Link on his way, including a magic jar with suction power. Link will also need to find and fuse magical Kinstones, which will solve puzzles and unlock secrets. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2005



DK: King of Swing

Preview

Donkey Kong's latest outing is definitely one of the more unique GBA titles in Nintendo's lineup. Instead of being just another action title, King of Swing utilizes a vertically scrolling play field, and it's up to the player to use the L and R buttons—corresponding to DK's left and right hands—to grab, climb, spin and swing their way to the top, using careful aim and timing to launch from object to object. Hopefully there's more to this one than meets the eye. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: PAON Corporation
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2005



Boktai 2 Solar Boy Django

Preview

Continuing in the tradition of last year's solar-powered original, Boktai 2 adds more RPG elements into the mix, such as more significant character growth, the addition of magic spells and more NPCs, including the return of Dark Boy Sabata, who will play a major role in this adventure. There will also be three new weapon types—swords, spears and axes/hammers—which aren't powered by sunlight, but can be powered up using stored light energy by the Solar Smith. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: September



Mega Man Zero 3

Preview

There's just no rest for Zero. After the mega-challenging exploits of the last two games, evil rears its head once again—this time in the form of Omega, a terrifyingly powerful reploid. Though the excellent gameplay formula remains largely the same, players will now be able to customize Zero with different foot, head and body parts, each with unique properties. The Cyber Elf power ups will again lend their assistance, and new weapons, like the jump-boosting Recoil Rod, will be available. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Inticreates
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Fall

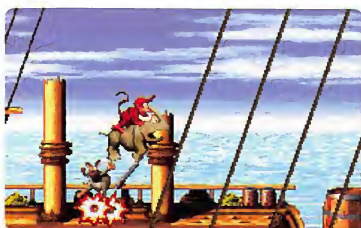


Donkey Kong Country 2

Preview

Following in the footsteps of its predecessor, Donkey Kong Country 2 is making its way to the GBA courtesy of the masters at Rare. Just like in the classic SNES version, intense platforming action again rules the day as spunky monkeys Diddy and Dixie Kong set out to rescue Donkey Kong from those darned Kremlings, special moves and animal allies in tow. Using a link cable, players can team up for co-op action, or participate in newly added four-player versus modes. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November



F-Zero: GP Legend

Preview

Based on the recent Japanese animated series, F-Zero: GP Legend adds a lot more depth to the F-Zero universe. Captain Falcon and new character Rick Wheeler are the stars of the game, but by advancing through story mode, new storylines featuring six other characters—such as Samurai Goroh, Jody Summer and Black Shadow—become available. Alternately, players can compete in the four circuits of the more traditional Grand Prix mode. Either way, it's classic, breakneck F-Zero fun. **CH**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: September



Kirby & The Amazing Mirror

Preview

For the most part, this latest Kirby adventure is pretty familiar. It's still cute and colorful; Kirby can still hover and inhale objects; and yes, Kirby can still consume his enemies, granting him the ability to use weapons like arrows or swords, or powers such as transformation into a UFO. The difference is that now Kirby has been split into four duplicate Kirbys, who can be summoned to provide extra help on his quest through the Kingdom of Mirrors. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Hal Laboratory/Flagship
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October



TMNT 2

Preview

Looking potentially even better than last year's GBA TMNT game, TMNT2 mixes more complexity and freedom into the fighting, with players now able to choose whichever turtle they want for any level, as opposed to last year's character-specific stages (though there's often a best turtle for the job). There's also more emphasis on exploration, with hidden routes and secret levels tucked into the game's five worlds. Vehicle levels will again be featured, plus a battle mode offers four-player mayhem. **CH**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: KCE Studios/Hudson
Publisher: Konami
Available: October



GBA Classic special

Though technologically identical to any other GBA SP, the retro design of the Classic NES edition is a classy tribute to gaming's days gone by that no old-school fan will want to miss. On the inside, the color palette is patterned after the original NES controller, right down to the red buttons, while on the outside, a two-toned base and faux ridges mimic the actual NES console. Even the packaging is great.

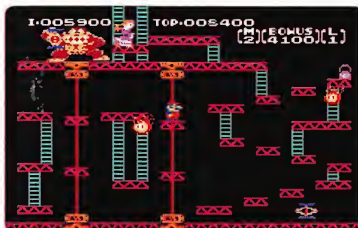


Donkey Kong

Review

Even all these years later, it's still fun and addictive to return to the simplicity of Mario's original barrel-hopping, hammer-swinging, gorilla-abusing arcade title. Of course, with only three miniscule stages, the nostalgia factor won't hold your interest for long. The hardest hardcore fans will get a kick, but it really doesn't offer enough bang for the buck. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



Super Mario Bros.

Review

Still infinitely playable and impeccably designed, Super Mario Bros. holds up remarkably well even by today's modern gaming standards (graphics aside). The pleasures of busting blocks with Mario's head, stomping a Koopa shell into a row of enemies, or finding a secret warp pipe know no bounds. Even Minus World is here. There's a reason it's a classic. **Chris Hoffman A-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



Ice Climber

Review

I never liked Ice Climber much back in the day. With its sloppy controls and crappy collision, it just wasn't very fun. I had hoped that the passing years would give me newfound appreciation for this so-called classic, but no luck—climbing ice just isn't a winning premise. The only bright spot is the co-op play. **Chris Hoffman D+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



Excitebike

Review

Excitebike is another classic where nostalgia makes it easy to give the game more credit than it deserves. It remains somewhat fun, and definitely takes skill, but with a mere five tracks, there's just not much to it. The custom course editor is still a highlight, and better yet, now you can even save your courses. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June

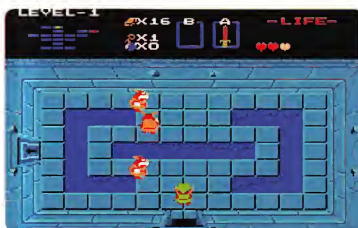


The Legend of Zelda

Review

More than any other game in the Classic NES series, The Legend of Zelda is just as good now as it was back in the '80s. This is the game that helped elevate gaming to the level it's at today, bringing players a whole world to explore, filled with incredible secrets and relentless foes. The only thing missing is the gold cartridge. **Chris Hoffman A-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June

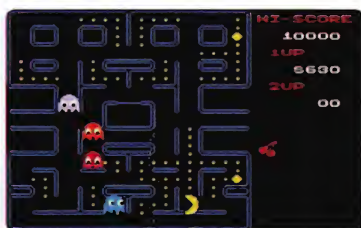


Pac-Man

Review

It's Pac-Man, the icon of video gaming. You know it, you love it—but you won't love the unforgiving controls of this port. Due to adjustments made to the diagonals, vertical movement is often an exercise in frustration. I was fighting the controls more than I was fighting ghosts, which just is unacceptable given the precise nature of the game. **Chris Hoffman C**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



Xevious

Review

It's sad but true: I never actually played Xevious until now. And boy, was I ever missing out. This shooter is absolutely brilliant, literally offering a layer of depth rarely seen in this genre, with the element of using either bombs or guns to take out foes providing both challenge and strategy. Quite nice. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



Bomberman

Review

Bomberman might not have quite its usual appeal without its multiplayer component, but there's no denying that it provides a good time anyway. What Bomberman lacks in intensity and level design (and box art!) it makes up for with its trademark unique gameplay mechanics. The added battery save is also much appreciated. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Hudson
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June



Half-Life 2

The prodigy returns, six years in the making

Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows 2000/XP	Video: Dx9 compliant
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: EAX
Memory: 512MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Half-Life 2 is, without a doubt, one of the most anticipated sequels of all time, a testament to the indelible impact the first game made back in 1998. Valve's original masterpiece was the godfather of storytelling in first-person shooters, steering the genre down a new path of continuous substance and consequential scripting in lieu of linear blasting and simple checkpoint progression. As Gordon Freeman, a

scientist stationed at the Black Mesa Research Facility, you inadvertently opened a dimensional rift while conducting a seemingly routine procedure in your HEV suit. The sequence of events that followed would chronicle Gordon's escape from the facility, running and gunning through the alien creatures that crossed over, and surviving the government military grunts and assassins sent in to clean up the mess and "silence" any witnesses. In a series



Below: The Strider robots are imposing, but think how the realistic physics could affect those spindly legs...



of bizarre events, Gordon is finally led to the aliens' native Xen world, and after surviving the gauntlet of elite hordes on their home turf, the brooding and enigmatic G-Man emerges to present him with an employment offer he literally cannot refuse: work for him and live, or face certain doom, unarmed against dozens of hulking mutants. Inevitably, the G-Man's proposal is accepted, and we're left to wonder about his chilling message—heralding the invasion of Earth, complete with images of destruction—and Gordon's fate, as *Half-Life* ends on a famously succinct and unresolved note.

It's been six years since the original game's release, and the story of *Half-Life 2* picks up several years in the future as the G-Man welcomes you to a bleak new world. Gordon has no idea how much time has past, and can't recall anything that has happened since accepting the G-Man's offer, but he discovers a nightmare scenario as the aliens he mistakenly released at Black Mesa have ravaged much of the planet, pillaging resources and slaughtering everything in their path. The setting begins in City 17, an eastern European metropolis being held in a rigid lockdown by the gasmask-wearing Combine troops. Citizens are in a perpetual state of panic and paranoia, as aggressive Scanner droids and armed foot soldiers conduct searches at will

throughout residential areas of the city. Droning instructions can be heard echoing over loudspeakers, directing the populace to work and assembly areas, as strict rules are doled out, followed by the unpleasant repercussions should any policies go unobserved. The streets are not safe, either. Combine forces have stationed Strider patrols, towering insect-like tripedal search-and-destroy abominations with spindly 50-foot legs and merciless lock-on lasers. The Combine dominion over City 17 is beginning to wane, however, while surrounding regions such as the Ravenholm suburbs are experiencing a plague of alien infestation. Although many survived the initial attacks, hundreds have mutated into zombies. Gordon has landed in the midst of this madness, and his fate is inexorably tied to the alien presence and the G-Man's mysterious plans.

This is a brave, razed new world, but not everyone is oppressed, and you have friends among other Black Mesa survivors and new supporters. *Half-Life 2* vastly expands upon the original's frequent character exchanges, featuring thousands of lines of professionally spoken dialogue and incomparable real-time facial animations. Faithful security guard Barney Calhoun returns from the original game, once again brought to life by voice actor Mike Shapiro. Dr. Eli Vance is back—voiced by veteran actor Robert



Guillaume (*Lion King*, *Big Fish*)—and we're introduced to his daughter, Alyx Vance. It becomes apparent early on that Alyx is Gordon Freeman's closest collaborator this time around, as she provides direction and recurring assistance. You will encounter other helpful characters new to the series, like Dr. Judith Mossman (Michelle Forbes, *Star Trek: TNG*) and the dynamic Father Grigory, a militant wandering monk who takes out Combine soldiers and zombies in the outlying regions of nearby villages. Not all humans are interested in protecting their own kind, however. Dr. Wallace Breen, voiced by Robert Culp (known for his work on the *Gargoyles* animated series), is now in league with the Combine and he may well become one of the story's

primary antagonists. In a strange twist, a notorious alien foe in the first game, Vortigaunt of Xen (played by Lou Gossett Jr.), has decided to revolt against his slave masters and work cooperatively with Eli and Gordon. All major characters benefit from a remarkable facial animation system with 40 unique musculature points and a revolutionary per-micro syllable voice recognition tool that allows for ostensibly perfect mouth movement. As always, you, as Gordon, do not speak a word.

Throughout the course of *Half-Life 2*, you will never leave Gordon Freeman's first-person perspective, there are no cut-scenes, and, like the original, only the slightest of loading breaks will separate environments. Game progress won't

"It becomes apparent early on that Alyx is Gordon Freeman's closest collaborator this time around, as she provides direction and recurring assistance."



Firing a weapon impacts you straight in the gut, thanks in no small part to how convincingly the enemy takes a shot.



be halted to list a series of disruptive mission objectives or the like. This risks removing you from an emerging storyline, the nascent flow and pace of a real-time narrative in which you are an active participant, written with an agenda of meticulously crafted action events as the supreme catalyst for advancement. Valve has benefited from deep investments in story development, the result of careful cultivation by Marc Laidlaw, who has been guiding the Half-Life storyline since the inception of the original game, seven years ago. While this work involves tuning dialogue and assembling smaller story elements together after the overall plotline is mapped out, gameplay considerations are integrated into the process at virtually every step. It's a synergy that first began in Half-Life, an approach to design that has influenced several of the best-selling first-person shooters since, and a modus operandi given a massive jolt of power in the form of new technology for Half-Life 2.

With such an intensive focus on storytelling in a first-person shooter, there are high expectations when it comes to presentation. While the first Half-Life used a hybrid version of id's Quake 2 engine, the Half-Life 2 Source engine is a completely original suite with native Dx9 support. Designed to execute the latest graphical features, Source also contains a package of fully realized animation, AI, reactive sound and physics systems. While some developers have introduced engines recently that displayed varying strengths with each feature, Valve has dedicated years of engineering to all individual systems, taking into account the integral role their digital actors play in the action game space. From soft shadows to multiple bump mapping variations, advanced vertex lighting, Doppler effects, and volumetric smoke, fog and rain, Half-Life 2's chaotic future setting will be

immersed in highly designed atmospheres from the moment you lace up Gordon Freeman's boots. There's no question that fast Dx9 hardware is the optimal way to enjoy the best this engine offers, but the team also spent a lot of time maximizing the visuals for older graphics hardware. As we've come to know during this era of visual extravagance in gaming though, fantastic sets are almost pointless without compelling character action.

Softimage delivered a custom version of their XSI animation software (used recently by ILM in the *Van Helsing* film) after gathering important feedback from Valve's artists and animators about how they would apply its powerful organic modeling to Half-Life 2. With lightning-fast blending, motion interpolation and advanced articulation, it proved to be a perfect match for their vision. Technology planner Ken Birdwell once again oversaw basic animation design, and a force of talented animators, including ex-Disney phenom Bill Fletcher (of *Dinosaur* fame), imbued character actions with dynamic emotive body language while striving to remain conducive to the encompassing art design. The result is a consistent level of first-class animation and characters that seamlessly interact with Gordon and play off each other's performances—whether quietly formulating a plan to escape an army of zombies with Father Grigory near a dusky graveyard or guiding hapless bystanders through a full-blown street shootout in City 17, surrounded by a dozen coordinated Combine soldiers.

When the original Half-Life was released, only the most rudimentary of physics techniques were being implemented into action games. Since then, the game physics renaissance has come to pass and first-person shooters have become prime territory for showcasing the technology. According to





"Beneath the detailed facade, countless opportunities for interaction exist, like pieces of a sprawling action puzzle..."

Valve founder and CEO Gabe Newell, *Half-Life 2* differs from today's typical approach in its ability to "physically simulate" game-world objects and the accompanying character interactions. In practice, this is represented through Source engine calculations of inertia, momentum, mass and gravity. Characters and objects inside vehicles will lean and sway realistically as the road surface, speed, turning radius and other locomotion data like tire friction and per-wheel suspension execute their effects. Any given material or object has a specific weight, buoyancy and durability—to determine velocity of motion, whether it floats or sinks in water, and how much weight or damage it can sustain. Even ropes, cables and complex machinery have been physically simulated to encourage practical (and painful) uses in gameplay. The presentation will benefit from these complex physics and deformable terrain, as characters and vehicles react in thrilling, unpredictable ways to motion and damage—like Striders wading through building rubble, or a Combine gunship barreling into a heap of abandoned cars. Unlike most games, however, the AI in *Half-Life 2* has been equipped to manipulate and react to physics objects in several self-preserving ways.

None of this cutting-edge technology would go down particularly well in an action game if the AI couldn't perform up to task. The *Half-Life 2* team has equipped its cast of humanoids and creatures with a broad range of abilities. As Valve marketing director Doug Lombardi puts it: "Bringing the new AI and animations together on far more complex creatures and environments was among the biggest challenges for the team, but they always wanted more." Not satisfied with simplistic trial-and-error behavior traits that "give up" and recycle their routines, Valve provided their most intelligent creatures with numerous solutions. If Gordon ducks inside a room or an abandoned vehicle, hoping to shake the hunt of his Combine pursuers, he'll be

reminded that this is not a stealth game. They will surround the area, smash through doors and windows, peering in to achieve line of sight before calling their contingent in for the assault. If such access points are unavailable, they will find high or low ground via ramps, ladders, narrow beams or ledges—seeking and adjusting for any advantage. If an object can be moved (and most everything is physically simulated), the AI will resort to rolling or sliding it away—off the edge of a cliff if necessary. In their defense, they will attempt to avoid any fast moving object and take cover if under fire or while reloading, using sophisticated node-based combat movement. And unlike the original game, troops will fire while on the move, creating dynamic flanking patterns in response to your position. Not all characters are so gifted, however. Head Crabs will simply leap atop your skull and begin feasting on brains, attempting to use your body for mobility, just as they have to convert so many victims into mindless zombies. Ant Lion aliens are vicious insectoids that seem to materialize out of nowhere in clattering waves, but they can be coerced into butchering on your behalf using alluring pheromone glands to enlist their favor and incite their ire versus your foes. Gordon's adversaries will exhibit very distinct personalities, much like his companions in the resistance, but with a frighteningly intelligent and aggressive disposition.

Half-Life 2's story-guided level design is a playground for physics-based gameplay, expertly sequenced and scripted like one enormous, free-form, interactive cutscene. Each of the dozen or so chapters and environments across an estimated 35+ hours of gameplay will be littered with objects that initially appear very natural, or even benign—just pretty scenery in the background. Beneath the detailed facade, countless opportunities for interaction exist, like pieces of a sprawling action puzzle ready to be activated and exploited. Weapons such as the Gravity



Combine Soldier



Gun or Manipulator allow for puppeteer-like tractor beam control over objects and enemies, and you'll find yourself emptying buildings of their entire contents, hurling chairs, tables, and even saw blades out into throngs of encroaching beasts. You might use this effect defensively, snagging grenades mid-flight and tossing them back, or to leave a trail of obstacles in your wake. More direct devastation can be achieved with the classic 12-gauge shotgun and XM-29 assault rifle, while the laser-guided RPG will violently displace objects and large chunks of flesh, and the handy crossbow returns with an enhanced scope for penetrating headshots. Gordon will also be taking advantage of strange organic weaponry from Xen, and, when in doubt, the ubiquitous crowbar is back—ready to smash open crates and blockades...or shambling zombies. If you recall the heart-pounding scripted events in the original *Half-Life*—where stricken scientists would suddenly crash down through the ceiling, or the alien Garg chase scene (and ensuing air strikes)

in the underground parking complex—expect tons of similar moments, updated to epic proportions through years of content development within the Source engine.

Fans can also look forward to new mod tools and upcoming Source remakes of all original *Half-Life* content, adding physics and dramatically overhauled visuals (see this month's Postscript) to perennial favorites like *Counter-Strike*. It's entirely possible that following *Half-Life 2*'s release and its subsequent expansions, Valve will lay claim to a full decade of multi-million selling releases, based on a single revolutionary PC franchise. In the meantime, as the gaming community awaits HL2's imminent and monumental arrival, we trail off with the G-Man's haunting words...

"Wake up, Mr. Freeman. Wake up, and smell the ashes." **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Valve Software
Publisher: VU Games
Available: 2004

EverQuest II

This power sequel is aiming for absolute genre domination

Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows XP	Video: 128 MB Pixel and Vertex shader
Processor: 2 GHz+	Sound: SB Audigy
Memory: 1 GB	Internet: Broadband

It has more than five years of content experience to draw on. It will introduce one of the most advanced engines ever seen. It boasts over 130 hours of spoken dialogue, 50 character levels, 16 races and 24 classes with unprecedented customization. Square Enix is so convinced of the game's quality, they have signed on to publish it—their first third-party title—across Japan. Are you ready

to make EverQuest II your first massively multiplayer online RPG? As this epic sequel begins its final approach to Beta, we sit down with design supervisor Erik Theisz to demystify the concepts driving a genre revolution. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment

Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment

Available: Fall 2004

Interview

Erik Theisz, EverQuest II design supervisor, Sony Online Entertainment

play: How large is the core EQ II development team at this point?

Erik Theisz: Our core team runs roughly 75 to 80 people at any given time, and many have been on the game for several years. It's really incredible to see such a large team excited about a game and working so hard to make it a reality.

EQ II is the first MMORPG with full spoken dialogue. It's clearly a technical showpiece, but how does it enhance gameplay?

We are building the world of EverQuest II to be an incredibly immersive experience, and giving all the inhabitants of Norrath a voice is a big factor in making that happen. Our NPC personalities will have their own unique voices when you interact with them. Also, many creatures in the game will have "battle cries" that

they will yell out during combat. What I wouldn't give to see the look on the face of a party's cleric when you first hear the group of orcs they are fighting yell, "Get the healer!"

You've invested a great deal of effort into dynamic NPC behavior inside cities. How does it differ from the typical NPC droning we usually settle for?

In many games, NPCs only interact when the player initiates contact in the immediate area. In EQ II, they will often approach players on their own with relevant and evolving motivations, and they are also totally aware of each other. When a beggar comes near a town guard, the guard may chase them off or tell them to stop loitering. That same beggar may find a sympathetic merchant who takes

"...the goal is to make the cities a living, breathing world within which the player is an active participant."

—Erik Theisz EverQuest II design supervisor



pity and offers them something to eat. All of our city ecology NPCs have minds of their own, and the goal is to make the cities a living, breathing world within which the player is an active participant.

What are the benefits of the "Any Race, Any Class" system used in EQ II?

We feel our "Any Race, Any Class" (ARAC) system broadens the opportunity for role-playing and the creation of unique identities within EverQuest II, as does our extensive character customization. We'll no doubt see many dark elf rangers and gnome monks initially, but I am looking forward to seeing how some of the other combinations play out. You may not remember the human wizard you grouped with two days before, but you won't forget that ogre wizard you grouped with two months ago because of the fun and challenge you had. I can't wait to see all the troll bards!

What measures have you taken to ensure that EQ II's combat system is strategic and involving?

Our NPCs have "encounter brains" that allow them to use incredibly diverse tactics which we can control on a very specific level. For example, a band of goblins may realize they are losing to a group of players, and one member of their party might sacrifice themselves to allow the others to escape. In another scenario, the NPCs might occupy the players while one member of their party flees to a nearby camp for help. Similar functionality can be applied to a herd of deer to tell them to scatter the minute they are attacked, providing a different challenge for those players. This gives our design team lots of flexibility.

Will it be possible to solo your way to the maximum level cap?

We have content geared both toward players who group and those that solo. It will be possible to solo to the max level cap, though it will be challenging. EverQuest II is a social game, and thus grouping is encouraged. While all classes

will have access to solo content, the game is designed so that grouping is more rewarding overall.

Players often prefer to solo or form small groups, as larger groups tend to have experience penalties. How is this being handled in EQ II?

Instead of having a set amount of experience per encounter that gets divided into smaller and smaller portions with each additional person you add to a group, we keep the amount of experience given to each member consistent regardless of group size. Thus it is more efficient to have a full group because you'll be able to defeat foes at a much faster pace than a smaller group can.

How are raids being handled in EQ II? In some MMORPGs, absurdly large hordes of high-level players will trivialize special encounters through sheer numbers, not skill.

The raid zones will be targeting a certain player level, and it is wise for a raid group to bring a balanced force—as our maximum raid size is 24 players. This allows us to create raid events that are not only challenging but that encourage every member to actively participate. It will end up being the skill of the players that will determine the efficiency of a raid force rather than its size or average level.

How much of EverQuest II's content is instanced, and how much is shared social space?

We make use of instanced pocket zones to provide custom personalized content and detail, not to remove the social aspects of gaming. EverQuest II has the ability to create instanced areas in a variety of locations: player apartments, tradeskill shops, adventure zones and instanced dungeons can be created on the fly to provide a player and his group with private content tailored to meet needs and group size. But the vast majority of the world is built for many players to interact socially just like they did in EQ.

With progress has come better models...both main and ancillary.



Why has instancing become one of the standards in MMO design of late?

I see instanced zones becoming much more prevalent in MMORPGs since it helps to bridge the gap between massively multiplayer and single-player games. In a single-player game, designers have tight control over what player resources are going into an event. In an MMO, there are far more variables involved. Instanced zones allow a designer to require players to have completed certain quests, be of a certain level or have a certain social standing to gain entry to the instance. Because of this, we can create custom content that is both balanced and challenging at all levels.

most impressive online RPG ever. Over time, how will the game maintain its elite technical status?

We have learned a lot from other games in the genre, and our team members are avid MMO players themselves. We have watched the industry evolve over several years and have built EverQuest II with the future in mind. As technology and graphics capabilities evolve, players will be able to significantly increase the quality of graphic detail in EQ II. The ability to truly scale with upcoming hardware improvements ensures that our game will remain on the absolute cutting edge of technology.

Thanks for this, Erik. We'll be seeing you online very soon!

Aesthetically speaking, EQ II is the

Vampire: The Masquerade Bloodlines

Powered by the Source engine, driven by bloodlust

Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows XP	Video: Dx9 compliant
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: EAX
Memory: 512MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

The mind boggles when one considers how many talented developers will design within Valve's Source engine.

Perhaps most exciting will be its application to games outside of the first-person shooter genre. One such title is *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*, from developer Troika Games and Activision. Having created classics like *Fallout* and *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, the Troika team will combine their vast RPG experience with the cinematic aptitude of the Source

engine, all within the intriguing, political, plasmatic debauchery of White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* universe.

Troika Games CEO and producer Leonard Boyarsky temporarily retracts his fangs from *Bloodlines* development to grant us some insight into the multi-tiered gameplay of this sophisticated action-RPG. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Troika Games

Publisher: Activision

Available: October

Interview

Leonard Boyarsky, CEO and producer, Troika Games

play: How much freedom is *White Wolf* allowing you, in terms of adapting the *Vampire* rule set to accommodate the RPG system in *Bloodlines*?

Leonard Boyarsky: It's been great working with White Wolf. They've been very supportive during the making of *Bloodlines*, in everything from incorporating our story into their canon to giving us an immense amount of freedom to adapt the system as needed for the platform.

There are seven distinct vampire clans in the game. How will players of different clans begin their careers?

Each clan starts out the game the same way: as a newly and illegally sired vampire. All clans are dropped into the same sleazy apartment, which may be extremely offensive to some clans, while others will feel right at home. Each clan is then given the same task to prove themselves worthy of their new existence. How each clan handles that task will be very different, however.

Will certain quests cater to characters with specific abilities from a particular clan?

While we do have some quests that are only accessible to a character from a particular clan or with a certain skill set, the main difference in the player's experience of the game comes from how his clan's skill set helps him to complete quests. Persuasively talking your way through a situation or sneaking through it feels a lot different than taking the aggressive frontal assault route.

Are there any general activities your character can partake in to earn experience points and progress?

Solving quests is the way to gain experience in *Bloodlines*. Now, that's not to say that you only get points for completing quests; you also get points for solving different parts of each quest, and you may get extra points for things like solving a quest without killing anyone, or successfully picking a lock or hacking a computer. You don't receive experience for random killing or feeding.

Can vampires be forcibly removed from their clan if they screw up once too often?

As in the pen and paper version, you cannot be forcibly removed from your clan.



"It's an extremely accurate depiction of LA...the Gothic Los Angeles of the World of Darkness, that is."

—Leonard Boyarsky CEO and producer, Troika Games

I suppose you could piss off all the other vampires in your clan and not be invited to the cool vampire parties, but if you're sired as a Nosferatu, you stay a Nosferatu.

What sort of innate powers can we expect from the various vampire types? Every clan has the ability to spend its points on whichever stats it wants. However, the clan choice does lead you in certain directions. For example: the Brujah have more points to spend in their physical attributes than their mental attributes. They will benefit from increased strength and speed through the Potence and Celerity disciplines. The Gangrel have the ability to summon animals and may improve resistance to damage with Fortitude. Malkavians can "share" their insanity with others through Dementia, or become invisible with Obfuscate. The Tremere can bend others to their will with Dominate, and the Nosferatu, Toreador and Ventrue clans will enjoy a mix of several of these effects, including Auspex, which increases perception to the point of seeing auras.

How does one execute "Feats" in Bloodlines?

Feats cover everything you do in the game, from action/combat to stealth to persuasion. Some Feats are passive, meaning they happen automatically, such as Hagglng—which immediately gives you better prices for buying and selling. Some are active, meaning you have to consciously trigger them, such as Lockpicking.

Will blood harvesting play a significant role in the gameplay?

The gameplay is built around your use of Disciplines, and your Disciplines are

powered by blood, so "harvesting" blood becomes very important to you, whether you get it by feeding or by purchasing blood packs—either as a backup or an ethical statement.

Considering all the innate Disciplines, what measures have you taken to balance ranged and melee combat?

We have a 30-page spreadsheet covering every possible combat interaction in the game, so that's a good start. We've also been rigorously testing melee and firearms, and after every testing cycle we refine them further to make certain they're fun and useful, and that the NPCs aren't crushing you. In some instances, of course, melee or unarmed might work better for you, and in others, firearms may be better, but in the end it all balances out.

Has it been difficult equipping your NPC AI with the tools to handle seven different vampire types?

It has definitely been a challenge crafting our AI to handle all the different things we're throwing at it, from frontal attacks all the way to enabling the player to stealth around realistically, but we think it's working pretty well. As with the melee and firearms balance, AI is now at this stage: play the game, see what doesn't feel quite right, fix it and repeat.

Which features of the Source engine are most impressive in their application to Bloodlines?

I think one of the most important parts of the Source Engine for us has been the facial animation technology. It has made such a difference in the feel of the game, seeing characters with realistic attitudes reflected in their faces. Of course, I need



Not long ago, fire didn't look so hot; speaking of which, someone seems to be getting burned.



to mention the fun we've had with the physics engine, but I'm sure that's not a surprise to anyone who has seen this engine at work. Also, the engine allows our graphics to be of a quality rivaling any game in any genre—not just RPGs.

What original technology has Troika added to the Source engine during development?

We've added a few things to the engine. The main things—besides the extensive RPG and dialogue systems—have been our cloth system and our lighting system. We added realistic cloth because we felt it was necessary for some of our clothing style, and we added a new lighting system to better handle the different needs of a really atmospheric nighttime game, compared to one with partial sunlight or full illumination.

The dark ambience in this cityscape is

rich to the point of intimidation. How accurately modeled is the Los Angeles we explore in Bloodlines?

It's an extremely accurate depiction of LA...the Gothic Los Angeles of the World of Darkness, that is. So, although Santa Monica does have the beach and pier, and Hollywood has its hills, this dark underworld is nothing like the Los Angeles we know.

Good luck to you and to the entire Bloodlines team, Leonard.

With the colossal single-player game and dialogue nearly complete, the next step will involve balancing Bloodlines' dedicated online component: frenetic vampire vs. vampire hunter multiplayer action with strategic Discipline selection between rounds. It all amounts to further evidence that PC gaming is enjoying a very good year.

Star Wars Galaxies Jump to Lightspeed

The Force storms into the cosmos

Preview

Recommended system specs (preliminary)

OS: Windows 98/ME/2K/XP	Video: 64 MB; Shader support
Processor: 1.5 GHz+	Sound: EAX 2.0
Memory: 512MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

In LucasArts' forthcoming Jump to Lightspeed expansion, Star Wars Galaxies players will finally have access to space combat. Most intriguingly, the developers at Sony Online Entertainment have decided to eschew the traditional RPG combat of their land-based Galaxies game in favor of a true real-time shooter design. Fans of the classic X-Wing and TIE Fighter shooters will appreciate the intent of this online pseudo-homage, and hardcore SWG players will at last enjoy complete autonomy over their interplanetary travels.

Although the starship action is so arcade-like that even flight sticks are supported, Jump to Lightspeed remains inexorably linked to its RPG core. The expansion will launch with four space-specific professions: the Imperial Pilot, Rebel Pilot, the mercenary Privateer and the crux of all space adventuring, the craft-building Shipwright. As with any profession in SWG, progress is measured through active skill use, not linear level gain, and advancing in these new professions will be no different. The character skills of the pilot and his crew will play a significant role in combat, affecting each vessel's performance and durability.

From the rocky asteroids circling barren Tatooine and the dense natural hues of the Naboo sector to the hazy edge of the Outer Rim, Jump to Lightspeed will offer over 100 space-

specific missions across 10 huge sectors. Many of these story-driven adventures will be privately generated for you and your crew, following deep and arcing plotlines that often culminate in boss fights with Hutt pirates and Imperial or Rebel forces. A fleet of aligned players can also work together to take on epic-scale Capital ship encounters. Victory in space will yield new parts and special weapons or credits to help fund ship upkeep. You can also expect several faction and alignment changes as you blast through layers of intrigue to complete mission objectives.

Star Wars Galaxies players have enjoyed a rather comprehensive, multi-planet visual representation of the beloved series. Jump to Lightspeed is set to complete the picture when it launches this fall with more than 15 controllable starships, including the X-wing, Y-wing, nimble TIE Interceptor and Fighter, and the Millennium Falcon-based YT-1300 transport vessel. You'll be able to name and paint your ship, as well as upgrade and configure your engines, weapons and shields. Personal droids can be reprogrammed and integrated into your starship, enhancing onboard systems. The ships' interiors are fully modeled, and, in the case of the YT-1300, passengers can move about the interior—manning turrets and other stations. The sounds associated with each ship are pulled directly from the films, and impressive positional effects convey the rumble of



"...the starship action is so arcade-like that even flight sticks are supported..."

engines and cannons, or the impact of enemy fire and various cosmic dangers such as lightning strikes from erratic nebulae.

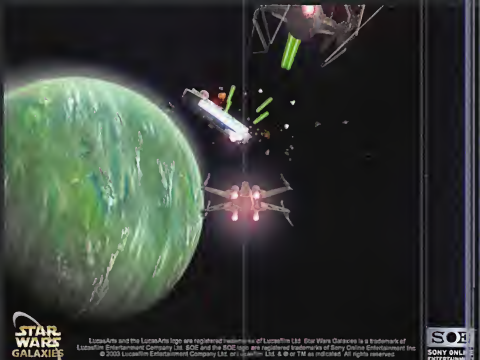
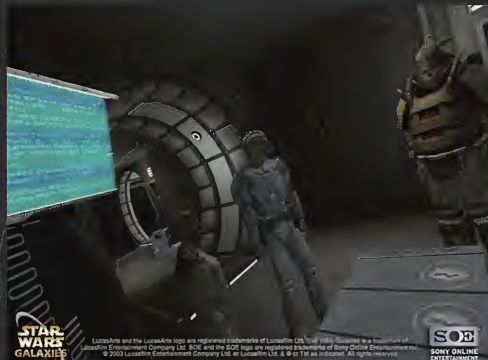
If Jump to Lightspeed's bold space combat succeeds, we may see other online role-playing developers implementing similar dramatically divergent action gameplay features founded on their existing character skill

systems. One can only imagine side elements in a fantasy-themed MMO, such as jousting or arena chariot racing, realized in full action splendor. In any case, full commendations to LucasArts and SoE for leading the way. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: Fall 2004



"I've made a lot of special modifications myself."





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Hardware Review

Falcon Northwest Mach V

A high-performance gaming thoroughbred

System specs

CPU: Athlon 64 FX-51	Memory: Corsair 1 GB - Dual-channel
Video: GeForce FX 5950 Ultra	Storage: Hitachi 160 GB - 7200 rpm
Sound: SB Audigy 2	Peripherals: Logitech MX Wireless Duo

When play readers see our glowing reviews of games like Far Cry and Painkiller, extolling the power of their gorgeous environments, characters and effects, there's probably a recurring question: what kind of PC do these guys review their games on, and should I invest in one? When we upgraded earlier this year, our primary goal was to assemble a hardware configuration that could handle the most demanding games at their highest quality settings, but we also needed a rig that could withstand the near-constant play sessions that gaming coverage entails—without absurdly complex and high-maintenance cooling solutions. Enter Falcon Northwest's Mach V FX-51 system. Immediately impressive with its custom "Exotix" panel paintwork and a superb airflow-conscious case with highly intelligent component arrangement within, this system has proven itself to be a star performer. The graphical heart of our Mach V features Nvidia's supremely competent Dx9 solution, the GeForce FX 5950 Ultra. This particular card is a screaming-fast custom-built Asylum board by BFG Tech, loaded with 256 megs, equipped with a dual-fan heatpipe cooler and boasting an effective memory clockspeed of 950 MHz. If you're suffering under the effects of an old system, or a slow and dated video card, it's prime time for upgrading now.

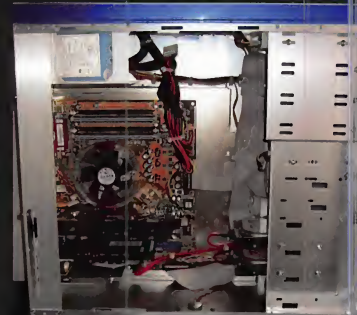
After all, nobody wants to play 2004's best games with horribly reduced quality settings.

The Athlon 64 FX-51 processor is the power core of our system. This is an excellent gaming processor designed with the future in mind, when Microsoft releases its 64-bit edition of Windows. Many new games will have a 64-bit client, and some developers such as Valve has estimated they will see a cool 30 percent increase in overall performance thanks to the extra bang per instruction. Our Mach V's motherboard is the Asus SK8N, optimized for Athlon's 64-bit architecture, and we run a gig of Dual-channel Corsair RAM, which is quite sufficient for the biggest games. This system has a Sound Blaster Audigy 2, an excellent 24-bit sound card with full THX certification, supported by top game developers.

We'll be sliding Nvidia's monster GeForce 6800 into our Mach V shortly, but there's no questioning the rock-solid performance of this Asylum GeForce FX 5950 Ultra in all the latest Dx9 games with *everything* turned on. Nvidia's omnipresent "The Way It's Meant To Be Played" branding logo is more than clever marketing jargon: their driver engineers actually work very closely with dozens of game developers to ensure compatibility and high performance in new titles. As a result, Nvidia's driver track record is more reliable than ATI's at this point, although

both companies have designed great hardware recently. At any rate, a blazing-fast Dx9 card like the GeForce 6800 has immediate advantages in newer titles such as Far Cry and Joint Operations, with truly superior rendering precision of all the contemporary texture and per-pixel lighting effects these games demand and deserve. Dx9 cards also allow you to use high-grade anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering, eliminating most of the banding, shimmering or blurring artifacts that tend to spoil the image quality of a potentially great-looking scene.

In the arena of PC gaming, the only prospect more certain than hardware change is hardware degradation. Having survived several brutal deadlines, including hundreds of hours worth of massively multiplayer review marathons, this Falcon Northwest Mach V system literally has not flinched—thus earning our admiration and approval. **Mike Griffin**



Impressively arranged innards. Ultra-high quality in effect.

"...a rig that could withstand the near-constant play sessions that gaming coverage entails—without absurdly complex and high-maintenance cooling solutions."



Turn it up to 11
The Asylum GeForce FX 5950 Ultra: so cool it has its own fans.



Madden NFL 2005

Another championship season

review

Flawless in design, perfection in execution, EA Sports has undoubtedly created an unstoppable monster that we call the Madden series. In its 15th year, this well-oiled machine enters the 2005 season with one of the finest football games ever crafted. Raising the bar to an unheard of level, Madden NFL 2005 is football at its very best.

Every year, EA Sports always manages to introduce a new gameplay innovation that makes the whole experience that much better. In 2004 it was Playmaker Control; this year, it's the Hit Stick. Football is all about big hits, and the Hit Stick makes it all possible. Basically all you have to do is flick the right analog stick in the direction of where you want to make the play and the game does the rest. What's cool is that it's not a guaranteed big hit every time you do it—it's all about timing. If you miss a hit, the ball carrier could go all the way to score. On the flipside, if you manage to time a hit perfectly, you could possibly force the ball loose and cause a fumble.

As great as last year's game was, whether you want to admit it or not, it was all about the offense—hot routes and Playmaker Control almost made it too easy to score. For 2005, defense is the name of the game with the introduction of Defensive Playmaker Control. Similar to offense, players are able to set individual hot routes for each player on the field. Every position can be manipulated—the line, linebackers and defensive backs. You can even fake a blitz and roll back into coverage—all in real time. And when you combine this with tweaked up AI (players are more aggressive this year), you have all the trappings you need for an unstoppable defense.

Another major innovation in Madden this year is Storyline Central. Remember how in-depth Owner Mode was? It was like franchise mode on steroids and, if you can believe it, Storyline Central takes it up a notch. Where Owner Mode was basically composed of you crunching numbers, shifting rosters and managing every aspect of your team, Storyline Central makes it all the more real. For starters, the weekly Fox Sports Radio talk show hosted by Tony Bruno is implemented into the game. So when in franchise mode, you can not only hear the show, but also his discussions about specific games, top players and even fans. What's cool is that Bruno will even conduct on-air interviews with players and coaches and get their feedback on the league. So while you're setting up your lineup for the next game, you can listen to Bruno and get the pulse of what's going on elsewhere in the league. Want to know how your team is doing? You can look up stories about your team in newspapers, magazines and even get updates on your virtual PDA—pretty damn slick.

And the new features don't stop there. One of my favorites this year is Create-A-Fan. That's right; you can create your own crazed fan from thousands of possible combinations. Virtually everything about the fan can be changed—face, hair, bare-chested, belly size, face paint, hats, wigs, jerseys—the list goes on and on. After you save your fan, you will see them during in-game cutscenes at home games. Sure it's a gimmick, but it works really well.

But aside from the improved D, Storyline Central and the Hit Stick, probably the biggest addition to Madden this year is online play on the Xbox. Announced at E3



this year, Madden on Xbox Live is going to be out of control. EA is planning tournament play for up to 32 teams and possibly league competition (so let's keep our fingers crossed).

Tom Ham A

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: EA Tiburon

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Available: August

"In its 15th year, this well-oiled machine enters the 2005 season with one of the finest football games ever crafted."



Def Jam: Fight For NY

New direction, new engine, same bad attitude

preview

You can pretty much forget about the first Def Jam—other than being able to play as numerous rap stars, just about everything has been rebuilt for this sequel. The tried-and-true Aki engine that powered the first game has been scrapped in Fight For NY, replaced by a new system of punches, kicks and grapples, given varied strength by holding down the L button as a strong attack modifier. Newly

added fighting styles, such as street fighting and kickboxing, have caused EA to refer to this game as a "fighting/brawling" game instead of a wrestling title.

Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: EA Canada/Aki

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Available: September



ESPN NFL 2K5

Changing the way you play football games

preview

With football games from Microsoft and Sony held back this year, all eyes are on two games—Madden and ESPN. I loved Madden this year, but I've been duly impressed with what Sega is offering with their latest pigskin title. Incorporating some pretty cool gameplay elements and visuals that could rival Madden, ESPN NFL 2K5 is looking like it's ready to play some ball.

All of the key modes from last year's game are back, including The Crib, First Person Football and franchise mode, but the most compelling new feature is the VIP System. In a word, it's revolutionary—it will change the way you play football games, literally.

The Virtual Identity Profile, or VIP System, takes everything we know about player profiles and gives them a major upgrade—huge, in fact. For starters, VIP tracks every aspect of gameplay. Stuff like how many times you hand-off in a game and how many times you go for it on fourth and short. Do you spin or juke around defenders? How often do you pass on the first play of the game? So why does

all this matter? Here's why: say you just played a game of NFL 2K5 online and the player that beat you left your scoreless and won by 56 points. How did they do it? Simple—just load up their VIP profile and play a game against "them." You read correctly—the CPU will play against you just as in the profile. Practice against their profile and then face them again, this time with a better idea of how they play. Sega is going to make VIP profiles tradable so you'll be able to play against the best players in the country. In addition to the VIP System, ESPN NFL 2K5 is showcasing a new franchise mode. Called the Weekly Prep, this allows players to manage their team week by week. Every aspect of team management, from workout schedules and film breakdowns to individual training and mini-camps, is handled through Weekly Prep. Bottom line: this is a micromanager's dream. **Tom Ham**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Visual Concepts

Publisher: Sega Sports

Available: August



NCAA Football 2005

NCAA scores with its home-field advantage

review

With 989 Sports canceling their sports lineup this year (which includes NCAA GameBreaker), EA Sports is left in a very interesting position with their college game—basically, they're the only show in town. With an already killer title from last year, you would think that EA would rest on their laurels when it came to this year's NCAA Football game—putting out a game with only minor changes and improvements. Thankfully, that is not the case. NCAA Football 2005 is not only better; they've taken the franchise to a whole new level.

For 2005, it's all about atmosphere—what I mean by this is all of the intangibles that we take for granted, such as crowd reactions and player composure levels. In NCAA Football 2005, EA has taken a bull by the horns and the end result is superb.

What I'm talking about is EA's Home Field Advantage system—a system that will benefit the home team and make playing as the visiting team absolutely horrible. For example, when you're on defense, you tap the "Homefield Advantage" button repeatedly; this gets the crowd pumped. If

you can get your crowd rowdy enough, it will do a number of things to your opponent, like make his controller rumble or make the screen shake, making it hard to see. Not only does it affect what you see and hear, it also affects performance of your players. Dependant on your players' composure levels, be prepared for false starts and missed audibles.

Just like Madden this year, a big emphasis has also been put on defense, specifically bigger hits, thanks to a designated hit button. I can see it now; it's going to be a fight in the trenches.

Rounding out NCAA Football 2005 is online gameplay (now on Xbox as well as PS2), new 1AA teams and a great TV booth. This is what college football is all about, and I've got to take my hat off to EA Sports. This is by far the best college football game to date. **Tom Ham A-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

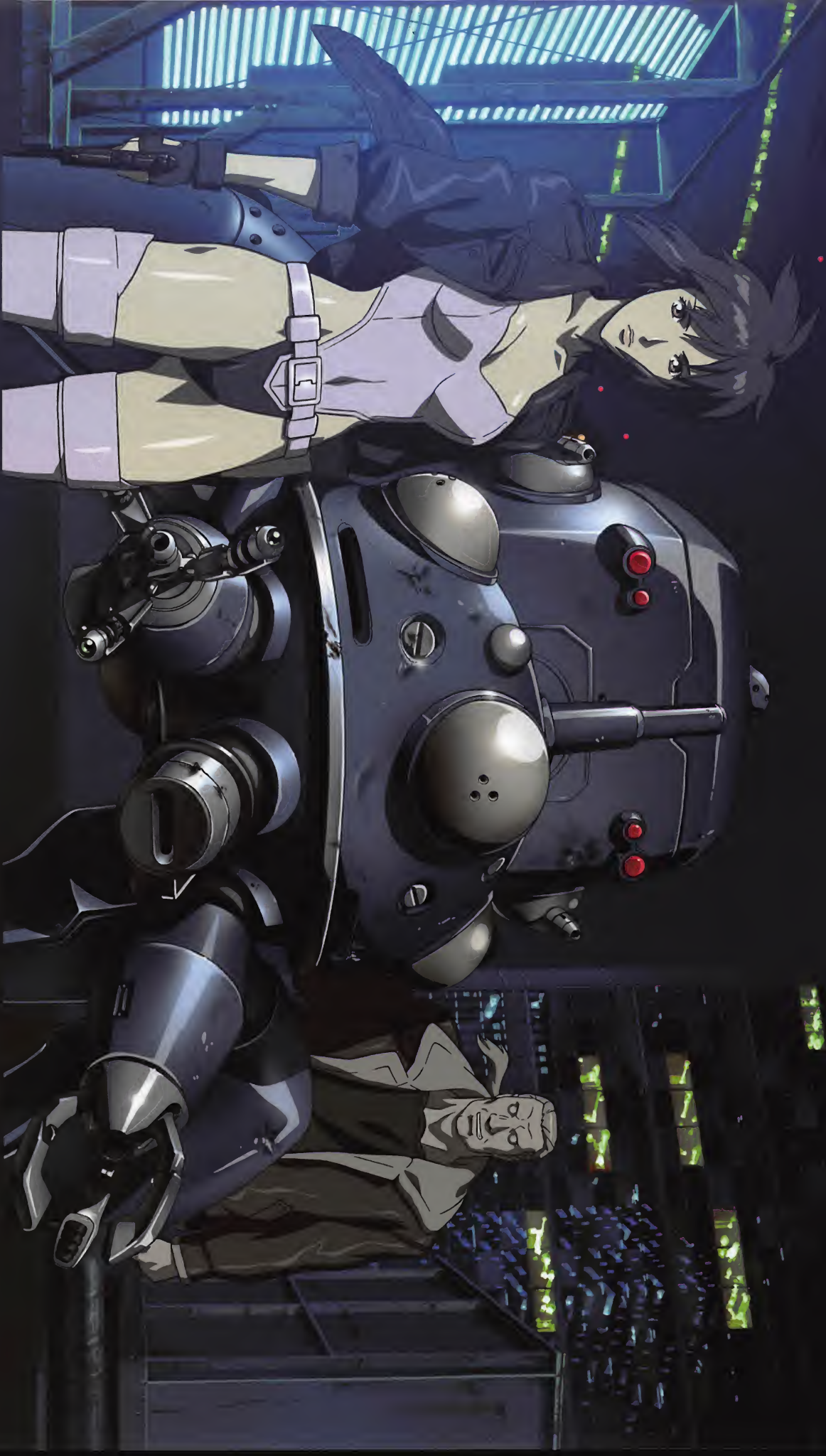
Developer: EA Sports

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Available: July



play anime



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Ghost In The Shell Standalone Complex

Coming out of its shell

The original *Ghost in the Shell*, the first omniscient anime to hit the West after *Akira*, took multiple viewings to fully grasp. With a plot entwined between human consciousness and the net, layered within its own brand of future tech, it stemmed beyond the confines of traditional Western live-action science fiction. For all of its complexity, however, it doesn't hold a metaphysical candle to the theatrical sequel, *Innocence*—a journey so cerebral even the highest-tech cyber junkie will leave scratching his or her head, eager to take in the DVD over and over and over again until full assimilation is achieved. As such, you'd think *Standalone Complex* would follow suit, but instead, it's the polar opposite, shedding its complex pretext to reveal a fairly common cop show formula as Section 9 goes about the business of cleaning up cyber crime. *Standalone Complex* is a chance for us to forget about the Puppet Master, Kusanagi's inner struggle (although it does begin to emerge) and all things philosophical and just enjoy Masamune Shirow's vision of a future where the lines between organic beings and cyborgs coalesce. Not to suggest that the series is devoid of intrigue—as Kusanagi, Bateau, Togosa, Ishikawa and Chief Aramaki go about the business of uncovering government plots, apprehending hacked shells and cracking cases no other agency can manage, there's certainly an underlying current pointing to something bigger on the horizon. You just won't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out.

Thankfully, the look hasn't changed significantly, at least not to the extent you'd expect going from the big screen to the TV screen. Although Kusanagi seems more Western (and more human) than ever, beyond the vehicles—futuristic cars, multi-peds and the irrepressible Tachikomas—the series is mostly traditionally animated with only slight touches of cel-shading and CG, adhering to the look of the original with animation that looks more OVA than TV. We get a wonderful enough dose of CG within the spellbinding opening cinematic set to Yoko Kanno's hypnotic "inner universe." Together with *Innocence*, which I consider one of the most impressive technical achievements ever put on celluloid (its beauty truly defies description) and an upcoming PS2 game that raises the bar on anime-based titles, this is Shirow's year to shine—how poetic that it falls on the 10th anniversary of Manga Entertainment, the company that downloaded it into our consciousness in the first place.

Dave Halverson A-

Studio: Manga Entertainment/Bandai Entertainment

Rating: 13 and up

Running Time: 110 minutes

Volume: 1

"Standalone Complex is a chance for us to...just enjoy Masamune Shirow's vision..."



The Major on a familiar perch—poised and ready to take us on yet another virtual adventure.





Lady Death

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SUNMIN IMAGE PICTURES CO., LTD.

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Dead Leaves

Open your mind and say AAHH!!

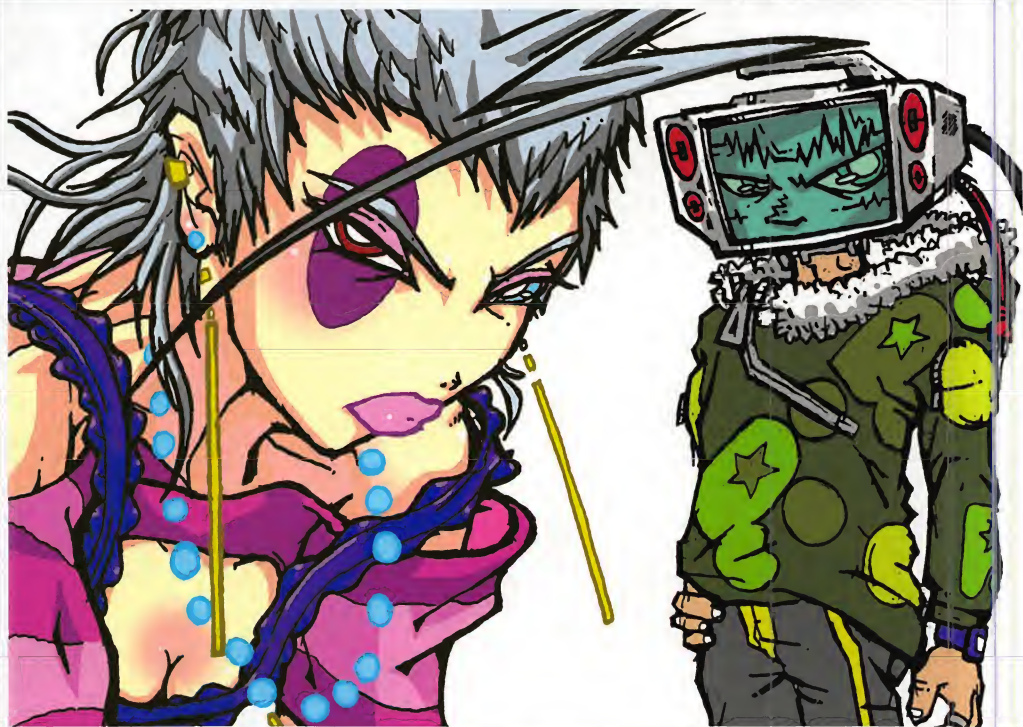
After the anime segment they created for *Kill Bill*, I thought Production I.G had reached the absolute pinnacle of cool, but it turns out they were just getting started, because there has never been, and likely will never again be, anything as super-freaking-lisciously über-cool as *Dead Leaves*. Throughout the annals of animation, anime, sci-fi or anything in between, nothing, I mean nothing, has ever been so wonderfully manic and completely insane to such a degree for this long a duration. Like one long gasp of "holy shit, what am I watching?" compounded by a relentless cerebral barrage of foul detail, *Dead Leaves* requires a myriad of repeat viewings to even begin to process. Call your friends, set aside a few hours and just go ape-shit. What's it about? Well, at its core, two very bad inmates (an über-hot sex kitten and a guy with a TV for a head) who wake up after an eight-year cryo sleep in restraint cocoons being whisked around a massive moon-based penal colony like so much dry cleaning, in which they're forced to suck food, poop into tubes and slave away in mines amid malformed inmates used as lab rats in the development of living weapons for the military...and then it gets crazy. It's hard to put this one into words. If you're a gamer, imagine if Treasure made an anime...this would be it. Otherwise, picture a jailbreak that makes Mickey and Mallory look like a couple of cream puffs, and then multiply times infinity.

All I can really say is do yourself a favor and do not, under any circumstances, miss this modern miracle of animation. It's not for the squeamish, and keep the kiddies far, far away, but you'll not have a better time filling your head with mindless carnage for as long as you live. **Dave Halverson** ■

Studio: Manga Entertainment

Rating: 16 and up

Running Time: 60 minutes



"...there has never been, and likely will never again be, anything as super-freaking-lisciously über-cool as *Dead Leaves*."



Guns, guns, guns!!
Quentin Tarantino would
blush at the immensity
of raw firepower on
display.

TO PROTECT THE LIGHT,
A NEW GENERATION WILL BE BORN INTO THE DARKNESS.



KNIGHT + HUNTERS

E T E R N I T Y

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K R E U Z

(FILE 1): NEW BLOOD



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Saber Marionette R

Playing with dolls

Honestly, the prospect of yet another *Saber Marionette* wasn't all that enticing to me, having been down the all-women-as-dolls road and back, and never finding anything I liked as much as that fateful day when Otaru discovered the sleeping "Lime" that changed his life forever. Within a world of clones where the female race consisted of mindless automatons to serve their male masters, Lime sprang to life with a mind of her own, and there were more where she came from...lots more. But *SMR* isn't what you'd expect, depicting an ultra-violent marionette rampage some 200 years later within a bitter royal family feud. Junior, a pacifist of human origin and heir to the throne, is guarded by three very special marionettes—Lime, Blood Berry and Cherry (of no relation to their predecessors)—while his cloned brother, Star Face, filled with self-conscious rage, is armed with three sadistic marionettes of his own design called Sexadolls. What follows is best summarized as sugar and spice and everything nice vs. the absolute blackest evil imaginable—yummy stuff indeed.

If you're a *Saber Marionette* fan, it's best to cast any preconceived notions aside and just hold on, but otherwise, prepare yourself for 90 minutes of spectacular animation bathed in ritual symbolism and loaded to the gills with massive explosions, ultra-intense combat and extreme malice. **Dave Halverson B+**

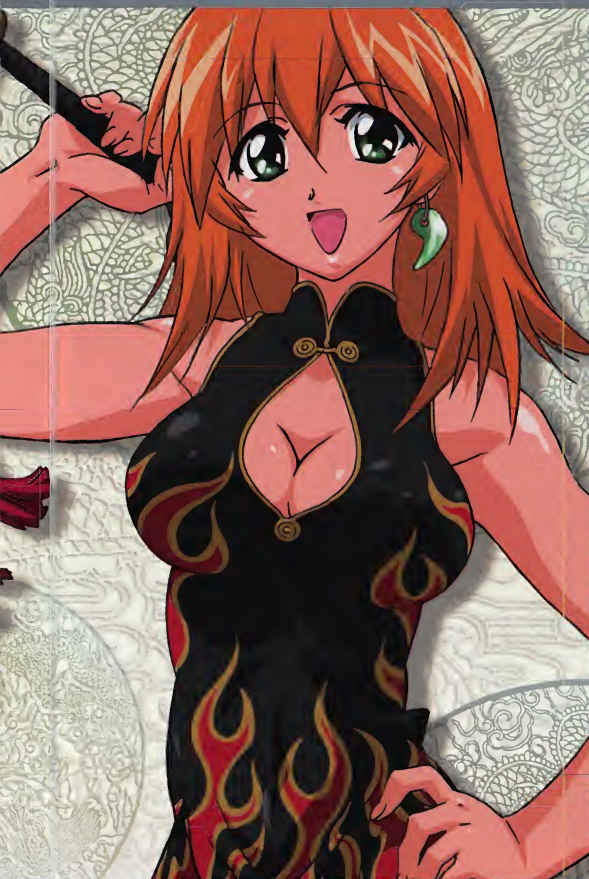
Studio: Anime Works

Rating: 15 and up

Running Time: 90 minutes



"...cast any preconceived notions aside and just hold on..."



"...this one would blow up the jiggle counter..."

Ikki-Tousen

T&A parade

Fighting anime: done to death or yet to bloom? *Street Fighter*, *Gowkaiser*, *Tekken*, *Fatal Fury*, *Angelic Layer*...the list goes on and on (and on). And while I'm not convinced *Ikki-Tousen* belongs lumped in with any of the above—it's more *Lord of the Flies* meets *Real Bout High School* than anything else—it's still a basic elimination-style fighting anime. Perhaps it's the non-stop, in your face, wanton T&A that sets it apart, because when it comes to bouncing boobs and panty shots, *Ikki-Tousen* makes the likes of *Variable Geo* (the original big boob fighting anime) look like Sunday school by comparison.

Although it's hinged on a fairly atypical plot about seven high schools vying for supremacy through "Fighters," (original, I know) *Ikki* comes across as slightly better than the sum of its parts. Whenever you have a heroine with a smoking-hot body who doesn't mind the occasional courtesy squeeze, things are bound to get interesting. Especially considering she (Hakufu Sansako) may be "the one," which leads to her tossing large boys around like pom-poms. Equipped with a perfect butt and "booby bombs" (this one would blow up the jiggle counter), she beats the crap out of half the student body before she even gets enrolled, leading to her and her bestest buddy and bodyguard being marked for execution on day one. Will they survive long enough to graduate? Who cares! They had me at booby bombs! **Dave Halverson**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment

Rating: 16 and up

Running Time: 100 minutes

Do you really think somehow you are separate from me? Look close. You are the one with blood on your hands . . .



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case five

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You can't erase the harm you've done.
No matter how many times you are reborn,
You cannot change who you are.*

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Gungrave
Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 1

With a new PS2 game on the way (*Gungrave Overdrive*) and an amazing new series that perfectly blends action and drama in stores, *Beyond the Grave* is finally getting his just desserts.



Megazone 23
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Part 2

Available with a 5.1 mix, sparkling new English dub and free poster, the sci-fi classic that helped shape a generation of anime is back and better than ever.



Initial D
Studio: Tokyopop
Now Playing: Battle: 04

Racing battles, rival modding gangs and cliffhanger melodrama. When it comes to capturing the spirit of street racing, *Initial D* is king of the hill.



Robotech Remastered
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Volume 3

The definitive *Robotech* collection: ADV's pays homage with digitally remastered extended editions complete with trading cards and limited figures.

listen to this



hack//Game Music Collection
Publisher: Geneon Anime Music

Like going to church, only not: haunting dirges and in-game sonnets for fans that didn't get enough drilled into them playing the game.



N.G. Evangelion OST II
Publisher: Geneon Anime Music
One can never own too much Eva music, and with five renditions of *Fly Me To The Moon*, NGE II ranks among the best.

Last Exile OST 2
Publisher: Geneon Anime Music
An entrancing compilation of pop, new age and classical, inspired by Claus and Tatiana's breathtaking aeronautic adventure.



Kiddy Grade
Studio: Funimation Productions
Now Playing: Volume 5

Eclair and Lumiere's adventures in deep space continue to build around one of the best sci-fi premises in recent memory.

must-have manga



Model
Publisher: Tokyopop
Now Reading: Vol. 2
High fashion meets horror when a model sells her soul to paint the portrait of a vampire and discovers a bizarre world no human has ever seen and lived to tell.

Princess Ai
Publisher: Tokyopop
Now Reading: Vol. 1
Ever wonder what a manga by Courtney Love and DJ Milky might be like? We neither, but it's a journey worth taking, trust us on that.



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Producer Profile

Interview

Don Rush, Producer, ADV



He's relatively new to the industry, yet has already been assigned the lofty task of taming such high-profile titles as *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi* and *Full Metal Panic!*...so what's up with ADV's Don Rush?

play: So, you were the man charged with converting the madness of *Abenobashi* into English...I commend you.

Don Rush: Aw, shucks! Thanks! *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi* was a blast. But while I produced and directed the dub, I definitely can't take all the credit for our crazy English conversion. The dubbing process for *Abenobashi* actually started with a very talented translator (Shoko Oono) and an equally awesome scriptwriter (Mike Yantosca). They spent lots of time researching, agonizing and tweaking—and I was involved during those processes, but the brilliance (if I can be so bold) begins with their work. Of course, once the scripts are handed over to me, I have the freedom to do whatever I want with the material as far as changes or interpretations. But working with Shoko and Mike, everything's pretty tight by the time I get it. Anyway, by the time the first actor steps up to the mike, a great deal of teamwork has already gone into the project.

How long have you been producing anime? How long with ADV?

ADV is my first job in anime, and I'll have been here two years this August. Before that, I was in advertising. (Still comes in handy for writing box text and trailers and stuff!) Coming from that background, I had plenty of studio experience, directing and producing the radio and TV commercials I had written. I had a couple of friends at

ADV, and that's how I got recruited. Now I have lots of friends here. Cool how that works, huh?

John ever stop moving that you know of?

[ADV president and CEO John] Ledford? He's always got something cooking—which is a good thing for all of us at ADV. He's definitely not a very static kind of guy. In fact, I don't know that I've actually seen him. One time, a flash went by in the hallway, and somebody said, "Hi, John," so I'm assuming that was him. Let's just say that I probably couldn't positively identify him in a lineup.

The first time you watched *Abenobashi* in Japanese, did you just go "no way" or did the U.S. cast begin to pop into your head?

I laughed. I cried. I peed myself a little. And all the while I was going, "No way!" But honestly, I knew it was going to be quite a challenge, and I did have some ideas about people I wanted to audition. But you never really know until you hear that perfect voice and everything just clicks. That's how it happened with Luci. I was having a lot of trouble trying to cast Sasshi, and I had actually brought her in to read for some other part. Then, just for kicks, I asked, "Think you can play a boy?" And she said, "I don't know. I've never thought about it." Then she gave it a go, and all of us in the room were pretty blown away by the time



Above: *Abenobashi*. Below: *NeoRanga*...and it's body paint, okay? Please, no letters.





she had gotten her third or fourth word out. Anyway, by the time it was all said and done, I had auditioned tons and tons of people before I was comfortable finalizing the cast.

Jessica and Luci are amazing in this (I love the V1 commentary; they're too cool). How difficult was it for them to wrap themselves around Sasshi and Arumi? Did it take a lot of extra prodding or are they able to just let it rip?

As much as Jessica and Luci totally rock, there were days when I was sure they wanted to kill me during the recording sessions. Especially Luci (bless her sweet little heart!). So yes, there was plenty of prodding. And yes, Sasshi's voice was more difficult to nail than Arumi's. His voice is much lower than Luci's normal register, so it was actually physically painful for her at times. It was especially tough on her when Sasshi was yelling, which was practically *all the damn time!* And I guess it maaaay have been tough on all the actors when I made them do the lines over and over until I decided I was finally done nitpicking, which also was practically *all the damn time!* (I kinda have a reputation for excessive tweaking, but I'm workin' on it!) All kidding aside, it got much easier for all of us as time went on, but it was a bit difficult to find those voices in the beginning.

As far as the commentary goes, I think that's a lot of fun, because the fans can get



an idea of what the actors are really like when they're not in character. For instance, did you know that Luci is a *girl* in real life?! Yeah! And where else are you gonna hear the phrase, "Molly Ringwald's coochie"? Probably nowhere.

Talk to me about the accents...

Ah, the inevitable topic of the *Abenobashi* accents! There was quite a bit of thought put into that as the scripts were being written. And knowing that this would be a topic of discussion, we put a full explanation in the insert of Volume 1. But here's my take on it: as you probably know, people in Osaka have a way of speaking (Osaka-ben) that is distinctly different from the standard Japanese spoken by people in Tokyo. The Osakan characters in the original Japanese recording are definitely speaking with an accent, and we felt it was important to keep that intact in the English dub. The problem is, there isn't really an exact American equivalent, so we had to come up with something that worked for this show. Different dubs have handled the Osakan accent in different ways—ignore it, give it a Brooklyn accent, Chicago accent, heavy Southern accent, even British. But after watching the show and getting a feeling for the characters and the overall tone, it became obvious that most of those choices just wouldn't jibe. *Abenobashi* portrayed Osaka with a sort of industrial yet semi-rural feel, so a not-so-heavy Texas accent was what we decided to go with. For some people, that's a bit of a stigma, and they don't like the accent. But in Japan, Osaka-ben is often looked upon with that same stigma, although it is becoming more accepted as Osakan comedy grows in popularity. We were very careful to keep the accent consistent and not have it be too over-the-top, but we knew there was going to be some controversy no matter what we did. In the end, I'm very happy with the results and with the feedback the fans have given us.

When you bring something as edgy as *Abenobashi* to the States, how much tweaking is involved in converting the script into English? What types of things do you feel need to be changed in order for it to gel with a wide audience?

With a title like this, Americans are going to like it for the same reasons they liked it in Japan—it's freakin' crazy hilarious! So it's important to keep the edginess and overall feel of the show intact. That being said, we try to stay as true to the original as possible while still sounding fresh and natural in English. That's where the majority of the tweaking comes in—trying to make the dub

"I laughed. I cried. I peed myself a little. And all the while I was going, 'No way!'"

—Don Rush producer, ADV

look and sound as convincing and engaging as the original Japanese recording. The only things that need to be totally changed would be really obscure jokes and cultural references that simply don't translate to English on any level.

Speaking of wider audiences, soon the mainstream anime fan will eclipse the hard core Otaku if they don't already. Has this changed the way you produce?

For me, it hasn't changed anything, and I don't think it will. Of course, I haven't been doing this very long, so the market is still comparable to when I started. But no matter if it's being watched by an Otaku or a newbie who tunes in to Anime Network and happens upon something I've done, my job is to produce the best dub possible. If I do it right, they'll both be glad they watched.

Which is tougher: the full-on off-the-wall stuff like *Abenobashi* or the more somber, introspective pieces like *Evangelion*?

While both have their challenges, I think the dramatic stuff is a bit harder to pull off. I'm super-skeptical by nature, so I tend to be more judgmental of dramatic stuff (especially stuff that I've directed), because the emotion can easily come off as fake if it's not done right.

Which do you prefer?

Definitely the crazy comedy stuff. I like to have fun a lot more than I like to be somber.

How long of a process is it hammering out a show of this magnitude? Do the actors fly in and stay in hotels for weeks on end?

We spent about four months recording *Abenobashi*. In this case, all the actors live here in Houston, so it's just a matter of making our schedules mesh and getting the actors in the booth for the number of hours I think I'll need them.

Do you record several roles at once or have the cast come down at different intervals?

Each actor comes in separately and records alone. But I might see several different actors in a given week, and we don't necessarily book their recording sessions in any particular order. Again, it's just a matter of scheduling and availability.

I found last year's *Neo Ranga* fascinating, unique and just way cool overall, yet it didn't get that much hype and kind of flew by under the radar. When you were producing it, did you have the feeling it would take off, or was it considered more a middle-of-the-road title?

Thanks. I appreciate that. *Neo Ranga* was my anime directorial debut, you know. I was brand-new here, so I didn't know what to expect. But comparing *Neo Ranga* to the shows I've worked on since then, I don't think that title was as highly anticipated as a title like *Full Metal Panic!* or *Azumanga Daioh*. That's probably why there wasn't as much buzz—it wasn't as much in demand. But I really enjoyed doing it, and I'm still proud of the way it turned out, even as my first effort.

It is up to me, however, to come up with recorded extras on the DVD when I can. Again, that depends on whether or not I can get it done within the recording schedule. With the first volume of *Abenobashi*, for instance, I had no time to think about anything except getting all that dialogue looped on time. But once we found our groove and had a bit more time to mess around, I started recording goofy alternate lines that we included on the disc under "Outtakes." Technically, they're not genuine outtakes, since I just did whacky rewrites of certain scenes, but they came out really funny.

Looking at recent trends in anime, like CG and cel shading, certain titles are beginning to emerge that many might think look markedly better than traditional animation: *Yukikaze*, *Last Exile*, etc. But then you look at an *Abenobashi*, which is solid animation and it blows you away. Do you think the more traditional shows' days are numbered, similar to when gaming went from 2D to 3D?

There's still so much going on with traditional animation, I just don't see it going away anytime soon. I hope not, anyway.

What do you prefer? What are some of your favorite shows?

I prefer the traditional stuff mostly. With 3D, you sometimes have that "almost-real-but-not-real" look, which can be a little distracting. But with cel animation, you're not as inclined to compare it to reality, so there's more freedom to just have fun. As far as my favorite shows, it's hard to say. I like a lot of the stuff coming out of Gonzo, Gainax and BONES (no surprises there), but I actually try not to get overexposed to anime, because I don't want to have any preconceived notions of how anything should be produced. I want to produce and direct my shows from my own perspective, rather than inadvertently copying something I had picked up by osmosis. And with so much incredible work out there, it would be hard not to end up emulating some of what you see. The other thing is that I just don't have time to follow anything with long, continuing story arcs, so I can never fully invest myself in a title. That's why I find myself watching shorter-format stuff like *Spongebob*, *The Simpsons*, *Dexter's Lab*, *Home Movies* and *SeaLab 2021* on Adult Swim. Minimal time investment required.

So what's next from Don Rush? What are you working on?

I'll give you the whole rundown. After hitting the ground running with *Neo Ranga*, *Full Metal Panic!* and *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi*, I'm currently wrapping up the last couple of volumes of *Azumanga Daioh*. After that, my recording schedule is already booked for at least the next 15 or 16 months. *Peacemaker*, *Full Metal Panic?* *Fumoffu* and some yet-to-be-announced titles are next in the lineup. And that's as far as I can see into the future right now. Sounds fun, huh?

Take care and good luck!

Hey, thanks for the interest. It's been fun! **play**

animedatabase

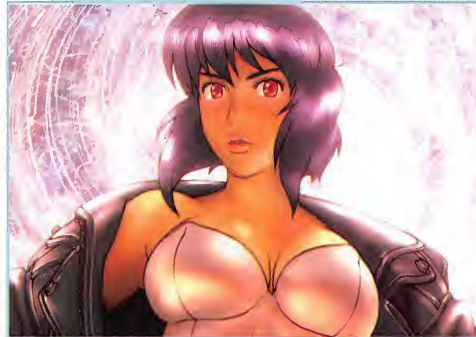
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

- 01 **Van Helsing: The London Assignment** *universal*
- 02 **Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury** *universal*
- 03 **Saikano** *viz llc*
- 04 **Initial D** *tokyopop*
- 05 **Jin Roh** *bandai entertainment*
- 06 **Inuyasha** *viz llc*
- 07 **Heat Guy J** *geneon entertainment*
- 08 **Tokyo Godfathers** *columbia tri-star*
- 09 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 10 **Ninja Scroll TV** *urban vision*



Play Magazine Top Ten

- 01 **Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex** *manga*
- 02 **Dead Leaves** *manga*
- 03 **Gungrave** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **R.O.D. TV** *manga*
- 05 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation*
- 06 **Texhnolyze** *geneon entertainment*
- 07 **GAD Guard** *geneon entertainment*
- 08 **Paranoia Agent** *geneon entertainment*
- 09 **Milk-Chan** *adv films*
- 10 **.hack//Legend of the Twilight** *bandai entertainment*



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Can't get enough Diesel power? Here's more fuel for the fire, complete with character designs by the renowned Peter Chung!

Van Helsing
universal

Hugh Jackman stars in this Scooby-Doo-ised animated prequel to the hit film. Flaming naked vampiress thankfully included.

Dave Halverson

- 01 **Dead Leaves** *manga*
- 02 **R.O.D. TV** *manga*
- 03 **Gungrave** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex** *manga*
- 05 **GAD Guard** *geneon entertainment*



Zach "PR" Korwin

- 01 **Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex** *manga*
- 02 **Noir** *adv films*
- 03 **Berserk** *medai blasters*
- 04 **Trigun** *geneon entertainment*
- 05 **Cowboy Bebop** *bandai entertainment*



Nelson Lui

- 01 **Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex** *manga*
- 02 **Azumanga Daioh** *adv films*
- 03 **Wolf's Rain** *bandai entertainment*
- 04 **.hack//Legend of the Twilight** *bandai entertainment*
- 05 **Saikano** *viz llc*



Reader's Anime Top Five

- 01 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 02 **Ninja Scroll TV** *urban vision*
- 03 **Sadamitsu the Destroyer** *media blasters*
- 04 **Azumanga Daioh** *adv films*
- 05 **Captain Herlock TLR** *geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

- 01 **Saiyuki** *tokyopop manga*
- 02 **Model** *tokyopop manga*
- 03 **Lament of the Lamb** *tokyopop manga*
- 04 **xxxHolic** *del ray*
- 05 **Those Who Hunt Elves** *tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

- 01 **Gungrave "righthead" OST** *geneon anime music*
- 02 **Last Exile OST 2** *geneon anime music*
- 03 **Eve of Evolution Revolution** *geneon anime music*
- 04 **Moonlit Archives Lunar Lgnd. Tsukhime** *geneon*
- 05 **Evangeline OST III** *geneon anime music*

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play MEDIA

Millennium Man

For a while there, it seemed like the *X-Files* would be forever retired to syndication and the DVD circuit. But now it's official: the sequel to 1998's feature film is on its way, with a script co-penned by series creator Chris Carter and veteran *X-Files* writer Frank Spotnitz. Carter will once again be producing—and that's pretty much where the details end for now. Great news for hungry fans, who in the meantime can get their paranormal, serial-killer fix with the upcoming release of Carter's *Millennium Season 1* on DVD. **Brady Fiechter**



Interview

Chris Carter, creator, *X-Files*, *Millennium*, *Harsh Realm*

play: The sun's still up. Shouldn't you be surfing?

Chris Carter: Well, I would be, but there are no waves.

Yeah, low tide. What are you gonna do? I had to go out just to get wet.

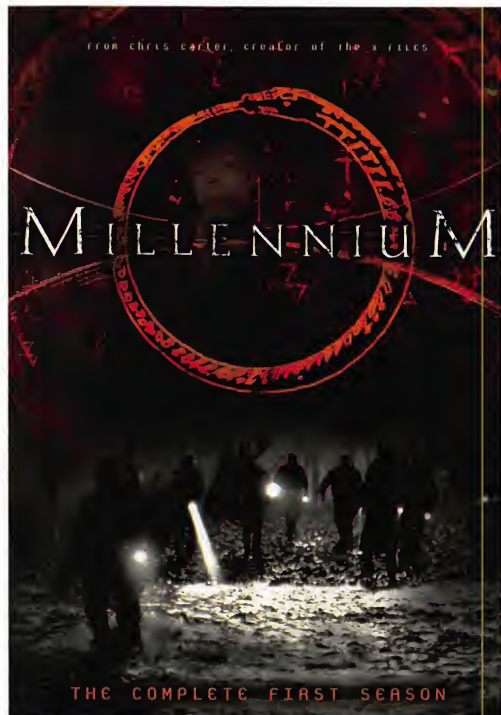
[Laughs] Yeah, sometimes you have to.

So, this whole surfing thing—does it provide sort of a guiding force for what you do?

It's more of a release from it, to be honest. It focuses me on something completely different from what I'm normally doing. One of the best things about it, I travel a lot, and what it does, it puts me about as far away from sitting [at] a desk as possible, which is what most of my work requires me to do. And it gives me a great perspective on the world.

And the idea of surfing is such a spiritual thing. Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

Yeah. Like Mulder, I want to believe. I've always said I'm a spiritual person waiting for a religious experience.



Nice box art. Inside, you'll find such extras as a Chris Carter commentary, a making-of and a look at real-life profilers.

It's interesting. Your shows are definitely dealing with darker themes, and you find such comfort in the surfing thing—a vibe that's so sunny and happy. There's an interesting dichotomy, and it stretches into your work. I always saw the shows as hopeful and they were actually very sunny shows in the sense of the romantic quests, and what drove the heroes was good. And that was set against the darkness you talk about.

And there's a quiet spirit in there. Frank Black on *Millennium*, as an example, is a family man; he's very dedicated to what he does.

Absolutely.

Is a lot of this a reflection of who you are?

Yeah, that for me is a sort of idealized...sort of a picture of masculinity and the adult male in my mind.

With the upcoming release of *Millennium* on DVD, you do a commentary on the pilot episode. As a fan, I love to hear when a director dissects his work and sheds light on what he was thinking throughout the process. Is that something you enjoy doing, or do you find it a bit torturous?

I really like to do it. I wish it was something I could do closer to the time it was done. It's sometimes difficult... You know what it is, it's not difficult—it's that there's so much work that's been done between the time when it was made and the time I end up talking about it; there's a lot of good stuff left out, because maybe it's slipped your mind. You really only have one shot at it. They show it to you one time and whatever you talk about is put down, so you don't get a chance to edit or amend your words.

I think some people pigeonhole what you do as science fiction; I guess I don't really see it so much as that. Thank you very much.

Perhaps a better definition is a thriller. There's always the underlying theme of a conspiracy, but the paranormal often dominates. What fascinates you about this subject?

I guess whatever you call it, the paranormal or the supernatural, it's the unseen world—that's what's interesting to me. It's funny; some of the scarier shows deal with the classic horror subjects, sort of tried and true in the genre. But we had the episodes that were tender and spiritual, and I think they were just as successful in their own way. I think, for me, the mark of the *X-Files*, and *Millennium* as well, is that they were shows with a tremendous amount of range. They were shows that could be many things. They could be funny; they could be scary; they could be touching, scientific, sometimes purely investigative, and they could still work.

You use the description of "tender." I really like that. What I've always liked about your shows is that quieter edge. There is indeed a tenderness that can be found. We're moving away from that psychological creepiness that truly frightens; we're getting lost in special effects and a louder style.

Oh yeah. It's also interesting to juxtapose it with the darkness. And to the gruesome stuff that was on the show. While it was tender—Frank had a very tender relationship with his daughter—it was also, in the next moment, it could be frightening and horrifying.

You read a lot. Thirst for knowledge?

Yeah.

What are you currently reading?

Right now? Well, that's hard to say. I'm actually studying to be a pilot. My favorite books, I have to say [laughs], are my study materials.

My uncle's a pilot. When we go up, I freak out. It's bad enough when a commercial pilot is in control, but there's something about having someone you know...some element of trepidation.

It's like when you realize your friends are running the world [laughs].

Exactly. Wow, well, good luck. It's a big accomplishment. Thank you.

Growing up, were you into more of the supernatural stuff, the ghost stories, or were you more interested in the sciences?

I was interested in literature and science, but it's my brother who's the scientist. He was the science fiction fan. I read things that he read, because he was so turned on by it, but it wasn't my first choice. I have to say I was just a voracious reader.

You have a foundation, the Chris Carter Foundation, which takes donations to apply towards students studying the sciences. It seems like you really want to push the fostering of science.

Yeah. The foundation I started, it truly represents my brother's and my hopes that young scientists, particularly the ones who don't have access to—or their situations don't give them—the wherewithal to pursue their interest in science, we can give them a good science education. We think that science programs in many universities are taking a backseat on the list of priorities to things like film school, which I believe is a mistake.

I totally agree. My schooling background is actually in



As *Millennium's* serial-killer profiler Frank Black, actor Lance Henriksen brought a somber empathy to his character.

engineering, and I still love to read books on physics and the sciences. That's one thing I liked about your shows: you seemed to care about keeping facts straight. You seemed to really care about being accurate and rooted in believable ideas.

You know, it's funny. We were very hard on our stuff, trying to make sure the science was good. It's only as scary as it is believable. There's a funny thing I would find—that you would talk to a scientist and you would get the scientific facts as they were. And then you would talk to another scientist and get a totally different set of scientific facts. Science isn't necessarily always an objective set of truths. It's very subjective.

What prompted you to create *Millennium*? *X-Files* was rolling, doing extremely well.

Well, the people who pay you, they want to see if you can catch lightning in a bottle twice. And so they give you an opportunity, which is a time slot, and they give you a chance to do it again. I thought it was a great idea, and I took the opportunity. But, of course, it created double the work, double the responsibility. And so it was an opportunity to see how much you could handle [laughs]. And it was a lot. The fourth year of the show, the whole group was producing two TV shows, and I had written and was producing the feature film for the *X-Files*. So it was a big year.

Touching on the feature film. There have been rumblings of the next one going into production. How do you look at handling special effects? The *X-Files* was always about subtlety—and, of course, was confined within the limitations of TV. But are you tempted to go more extreme, ramping up the use of CG and effects? That doesn't seem to be your style.

You have to use special effects when it's right to use them. There have been scary movies, particularly remakes of scary movies where they had all the special effects at their disposal, and they used them. They kind of ruined the scare because often the less you see, the scarier it is. I want to always let the story dictate, and when I'm doing something scary, definitely make use of the effects, but make it as scary as possible and not consider the special effects more important than the scare.

"Trust no one." Did that now-famous tagline come from a personal belief? More than ever today, you can kind of sadly take that phrase to heart.

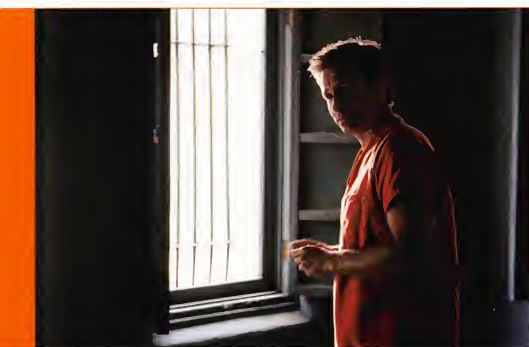
Yeah, it's funny now. On the heels of 9/11, they were saying, "Trust us." And we certainly wanted to, because there seemed to be no one else to trust.

You don't seem at all concerned with fame and dealing with its by-products.

I'm not at all enamored of the spotlight. You're very true.

Well, the best way to get away from it all is retreat to the water.

They can't find you there. play



David Duchovny as Mulder, contemplating exactly when that new *X-Files* movie's gonna land.

"Like Mulder, I want to believe. I've always said I'm a spiritual person waiting for a religious experience."

—Chris Carter, creator, *X-Files*

Tactical Espionage Comic Book

Metal Gear Solid

Solid Snake has defeated terrorist armies, battled a cyborg ninja with his bare hands and destroyed walking nuclear battle tanks on more than one occasion, but now the legendary stealth-action hero is going into new territory: the world of comic books. Following in the shadows of the successful *Silent Hill: Dying Inside* miniseries, *Metal Gear Solid* is sneaking onto comic store shelves courtesy of IDW Publishing in a series based on the original MGS game. Fan-favorite artist/illustrator Ashley Wood (Spawn, CSI) brings Hideo Kojima's creation to life with a dynamic style that stays true to the game's original aesthetic, while comic/video game crossover vet Kris Oprisko (*Resident Evil*) is handling writing duty. The mission begins this September. **Chris Hoffman**

Interview

Kris Oprisko, writer, *Metal Gear Solid*

play: First, how did IDW acquire the license to produce the *Metal Gear Solid* comic? Did the *Silent Hill* comic pave the way?

Kris Oprisko: Our relationship with Konami has been a great one. We have, of course, published the *Silent Hill: Dying Inside* miniseries (the collected edition of which will be released this August), and Konami is also currently developing the IDW title CVO into a video game. This previous relationship certainly helped us get *Metal Gear Solid*. In the main, though, it was accomplished by our presentation to Kojima-san, in which we demonstrated our knowledge, understanding and deep love of the property itself before getting down to the nuts and bolts of the business deal. Also, Kojima-san is a big fan of Ashley Wood (as Ash is of Kojima-san), which definitely made things easier!

I understand you have an extensive background with video games and game-related comic books. Could you tell me a bit more about how you got involved in the gaming industry, and what specific projects you've worked on?

Over the years, both at IDW and in my former position at WildStorm Productions, I've been lucky enough to do a good amount of work with the video game industry. I've penned comics based on Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter, Future Cop: L.A.P.D. and *Resident Evil* before working on *Metal Gear Solid*. I've also managed products in which we've designed characters for video games, most notably for EA's *Street Sk8er* series. As to how I got involved in it, it was a function of the crossover of the two industries. Video game companies know quality when they see it, so when they want custom comics or character design, we're confident that they'll look our way!

How have previous projects prepared you for working with *Metal Gear Solid*?

In general, the previous projects helped me learn how to retain the flavor of the original game while at the same time exploiting the benefits of comics. In comic form, I can linger on the really cool parts of the game longer than a quick cutscene!

How did you land the position of writer? Are you a big

As these sample pages demonstrate, the MGS comic will stay true to the game's original illustration style.

MGS fan?

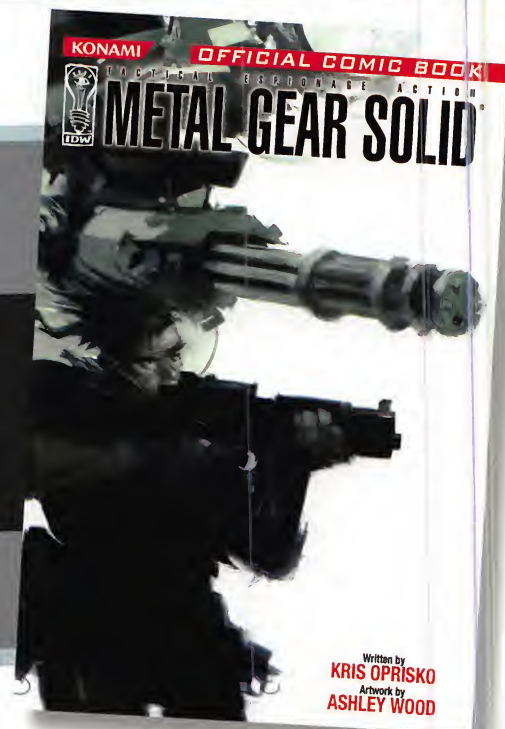
I think anyone that plays video games must be a big MGS fan. I mean, what's not to like?! So, yeah, when this project came along I was all over it!

How far along in the creative process is the comic currently?

Currently the second issue is being scripted. Coming along nicely, too!

Will the series be ongoing or planned as finite?

It's ongoing, but it does tell the story of the first game, so there's obviously an ending there. But there is no set idea of how many issues it will take to tell the story—I'll let the story itself determine that, instead of artificially constraining

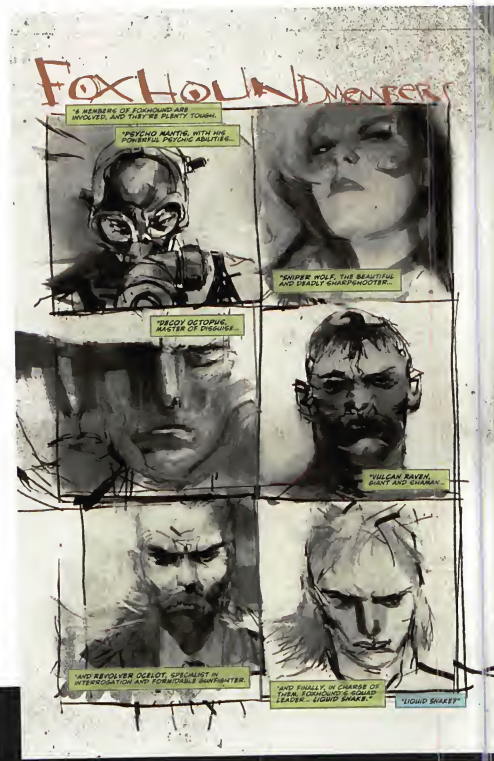


it in any way.

How close will the comic follow the game?

As I said earlier, the comics will tell the story of the original game. However, there will be instances where scenarios only hinted at in the dialogue will be more fully explored. But I don't want to go off on a tangent either. *Metal Gear Solid* already has a great story, and it's my job to present that story in comic form in the best and most exciting way possible.

What do you think are the most important elements of MGS, and how will you bring that out in the comic?



"Metal Gear Solid already has a great story, and it's my job to present that story in comic form in the best and most exciting way possible."

Kris Oprisko, writer, Metal Gear Solid

The main characters, especially the calm, cool demeanor of Snake in any situation, is definitely an important element. And the stealth component is a huge factor as well. Pacing will be my main way of bringing these elements out in the comic, but the art will also play a major part.

Since a big part of Metal Gear is the tension of not being caught, how are you going to convey that in comic book form?

Again, pacing will accomplish this. But I also feel that Ashley Wood's amazing artwork is an even bigger factor here. Ash's atmospheric feel lends itself perfectly to periods of tension (and release as well!).

MGS is known for its complex storylines. As a writer, is that a blessing or a curse?

Definitely a blessing, as there's a lot of juicy stuff to sink my teeth into as a writer. But there are also times where it's definitely a big challenge—for instance, distilling dialogue that may last 10 minutes in a cutscene down to a couple balloons.

Do you feel a lot of pressure working on such a respected property, especially since Hideo Kojima is known for keeping a tight reign on his creations?

I wouldn't say pressure—I'd say that it's more of a question of dealing with the property with the knowledge and respect it deserves. Kojima-san has been absolutely wonderful to work with, and we value the fact that he trusts us with his brilliant creation. We are not about to let him, or the fans of MGS, down.

Is there any character or scene you're particularly looking forward to writing? Any you're dreading?

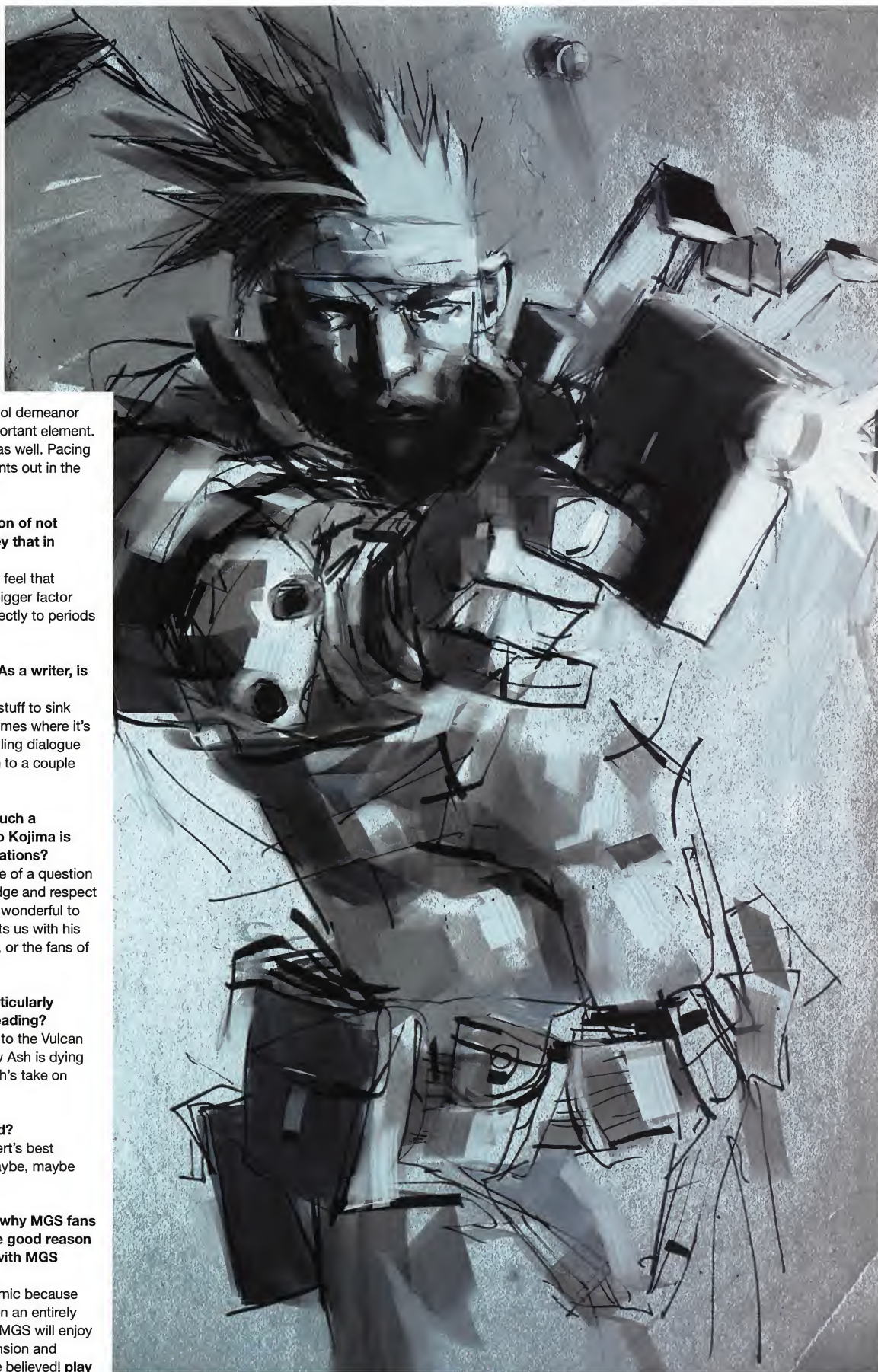
None I'm dreading, but I am looking forward to the Vulcan Raven scenes. This is mainly because I know Ash is dying to dig into the guy, and I can't wait to see Ash's take on him.

Will the famous cardboard box be featured?

Ah, the cardboard box! Every infiltration expert's best friend! As to whether or not it'll show up...maybe, maybe not. That's what you call stealth information!

Finally, can you give me one good reason why MGS fans should look forward to the comic, and one good reason why comic fans who may not be familiar with MGS should look forward to it?

MGS fans should definitely check out the comic because they're going to see an old friend presented in an entirely new way. And those who aren't familiar with MGS will enjoy the title because of the gripping storyline, tension and action, as well as art that has to be seen to be believed! **play**





Hellboy

Starring: Ron Perlman, John Hurt, Selma Blair, Rupert Evans
Director: Guillermo del Toro
Released By: Columbia TriStar
Rated: PG-13

Hellboy is a great comic book movie for many reasons that hinge on just one: Guillermo Del Toro. By selecting a director with a clear understanding and love of the material and a singular vision—to pay homage to Mike Mignola's work rather than try to mimic it—the end result is arguably the best comic book-inspired film to date. Ron Perlman (he is Hellboy) and Selma Blair are perfect in their respective roles, amid a great cast all around, anchored by John Hurt, who brings his best to the material. The film comes across as pure and undiluted, with a semblance of



plausibility due to Del Toro's use of practical effects and balance between CG and animatronics, a great script, a humble creator in Mignola and a team of makeup artists that must have made a deal with the red man himself. This is what happens when it all clicks.

Extras: The most comprehensive and interesting since *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*'s. Del Toro, like Rodriguez, knows what makes great entertainment, and we get to see him work his magic through post, 116 days of shooting and beyond—fascinating stuff. I hope Oscar doesn't overlook the makeup, sets, costume designs and effects at work here. CG is one thing, but actually creating creatures with realistic animatronic tentacles is what movie magic is all about. Now if they could just get Starbreeze to make a game. **Dave Halverson**

Movie: A- **DVD:** A



Hidalgo

Starring: Viggo Mortensen, Zuleikha Robinson, Omar Sharif
Director: Joe Johnston
Released By: Touchstone Pictures
Rated: PG-13

I've always had a soft spot for racing movies, from cheese like *Cannonball Run* to the Steve McQueen classic *Le Mans*, and *Hidalgo* does it right, with a multi-scenario racing adventure that has a heart of pure American gold. By paying homage to both the American Indian and wild mustangs, *Hidalgo* succeeds on multiple levels. It not only gets the period right, from the boat trip over to the trek through the Middle East (thanks in no small part to the incomparable Omar Sharif), but exudes a level of high adventure missing in today's throwaway adventure vehicles. Viggo Mortensen is the real thing—a natural talent along the lines of a Redford or Harrison Ford. He doesn't need muscles and one-liners to be a man; arm this guy with a good screenplay and he's a force to be reckoned with.

Extras: It's almost a drawback seeing the real thing (*Hidalgo* is based on the real life exploits of Frank T. Hopkins), knowing that it couldn't have been nearly as romantic, but it's all here regardless, along with a fairly comprehensive behind-the-scenes, depicting how the cast and crew fought the desert sands for every painstaking scene. **Dave Halverson**

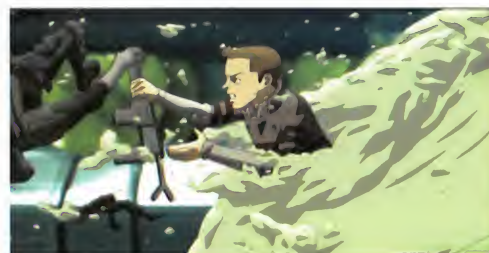
Season: B **DVD:** B

The Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury

Starring: Vin Diesel, Rhiana Griffith, Keith David
Director: Peter Chung
Released By: Universal
Rated: NR

So what kind of intriguing happenings went on in the five years between Riddick's entrance in *Pitch Black* and his flight for freedom in *The Chronicles of Riddick*? This 35-minute short, directed by *Aeon Flux* creator Peter Chung, was billed as the platform to fill in those blanks for wanting fans, but it ultimately leaves you dissatisfied. Beginning right after the events of *Pitch Black*, *The Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury* shows fugitive Riddick and his fellow survivors escaping the planet, eventually finding themselves stranded in space. They're picked up by a rogue ship run by an eccentric collector who's intrigued by mass killers—and now the biggest prize of all is about to be saddled with a new set of vicious problems. As Riddick goes on his rampage to get out of yet another one of his seemingly hopeless predicaments, we get little in plot and an overload in sensational fight scenes, well staged and visually snappy. *Dark Fury* has its moments—Chung's distinct style is the big highlight—but, surprisingly, the animation doesn't dazzle nearly enough to make up for the thin dialogue.

Extras: For a lower-budget direct-to-video title, there's a decent amount of material; it's just all too short. An



The A-Team Season 1

Starring: George Peppard, Mr. T, Dirk Benedict, Dwight Schultz, M. Culea
Director: Rod Holcomb, Ron Satlof et al
Released By: Universal
Rated: NR

If you like your action with extra cheese and a hearty side of T, look no further than *The A-Team*, now available on DVD in all its hokey glory. There's no doubt about it: this '80s flashback is formulaic, unrealistic and often poorly acted—yet still manages to be entertaining through its mix of Saturday morning cartoon violence and comedy, both intentional and not. How can you not chuckle at a truck flying through the air, rolling over repeatedly and having its cab squashed flat upon impact, followed by a conspicuous cut back to the vehicle just so the bad-guy driver can say that he's OK? This four-disc set shows how this popular series got its start, beginning with the pilot episode (featuring a clearly miscast Tim Dunigan in the role of Face) and continuing with the adventures of these four Vietnam vet fugitives through the rest of the 13-episode season. The plots are generally wafer-thin, but it's really the interaction of the four leads that makes the show so much fun, especially Dwight Schultz's ludicrous antics as Murdock and, even more so, the iconic Mr. T's portrayal of BA Baracus. If nothing else, *The A-Team* demonstrates just how gratuitous TV has become in the past 20 years; back then, we got combat sequences where the worst violence in a five-minute firefight was broken windows and blown tires. Though certainly not the most intelligent show around, *The A-Team* has fun with itself, as well as a lot of heart.

Extras: All I wanted was some episode commentary from Mr. T, but instead I got a big, fat nothing—unless you count the episode montages that run prior to each show.

Chris Hoffman
Season: B- **DVD:** D-

interview with director Chung is brief but interesting. "Animatic to Animation" is cool at first, but drags quickly. The "From *Pitch Black* to *The Chronicles of Riddick*" featurette is the best thing here. **Brady Fiechter**

Movie: B- **DVD:** B-





Stylish digital photography

Sony Cyber-Shot DSC-T1

www.sonystyle.com

Price: \$499.99

If there is one thing we can always count on from Sony, it's definitely style. Whether it's their latest XBR HDTV, VAIO laptop or MD player, we can always bet it's going to be sleeker and sexier than the competition. Just take a look at the DSC-T1—about the size of a deck of cards, it's truly a remarkable piece of digital technology. Under its glamorous shell is a Carl Zeiss Vario-Tessar Lens, capable of 3X optical zoom and 2X digital zoom (that's 6X total). The Real Imaging Processor circuit lets you take full-resolution images in one-second intervals and even four high-speed burst shots in less than two seconds. And at five megapixels, the T1 will impress even the most ardent camera geek. Have a movie fetish? The T1 can capture and play back MPEG-VX Fine Mode with audio. And since you're only limited to the size of your Memory Stick Pro Duo card (which go up to 512MB), your imagination can run wild.

Portable digital audio

Creative MuVo Slim

www.creative.com

Price: \$199.99

At first glance, the MuVo Slim may look any other portable digital music player trying to sport a thinner form, but after closer inspection, you'll see what separates it from the competition. With 256MB of storage space, the MuVo Slim can hold up to eight hours of WMAs or four hours of MP3s. Sure, there's a five-band graphic equalizer and USB 2.0 support (for lightning-fast music transfers), but what we liked most about the MuVo Slim was that it had a built-in FM radio flaunting 32 presets and the ability to record your favorite programming. The built-in microphone allows for voice recording too (up to 16 hours). Other features include a high-resolution LCD that shows player status, track details and battery levels, removable Li-ion battery and high-quality Neodymium Earphones. It may be a little pricey, but that's never stopped you before, right?

Laptop gaming PC

Dell Inspiron XPS Laptop

www.dell.com

Price: Varies depending upon configuration

Here's a familiar scenario—you're on a cross-country flight, you just got the latest FPS game and you want to do some gaming on your laptop. But like most folks, your laptop is good for one thing—watching DVDs...err...work. But all is not lost. Following in the footsteps of their successful desktop gaming machine, the Dimension XPS, Dell brings us the Inspiron XPS. With a Pentium 4 Extreme Edition (3.4 GHz) under the hood and the latest ATI Mobility Radeon 9800 with 256MB of memory, you'll be able to play more than just UT2004—try Doom 3 and Half-Life 2—um, yeah, that rocks. A built-in subwoofer, an integrated DVI, Gigabit Ethernet and four USB 2.0 ports round out this puppy. The 15.4" Wide Aspect UXGA Display is great for games and perfect for watching DVDs. Together with customizable backs, a DVD+RW/+R and an 80GB (5400 RPM) hard drive, the XPS simply rocks.





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